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Yehuda Amichai, Claude Simon Interviews
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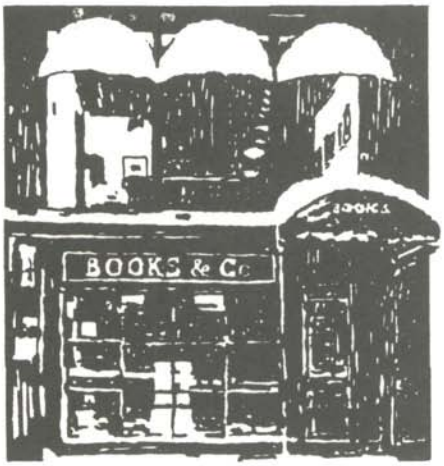

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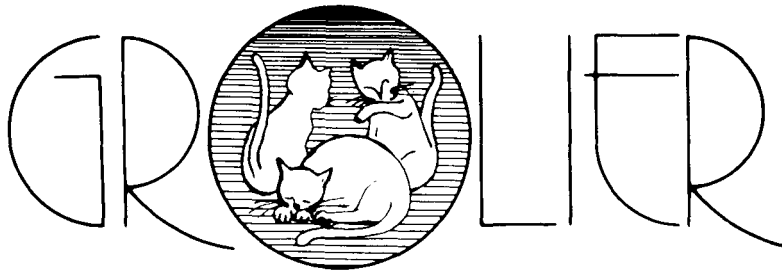

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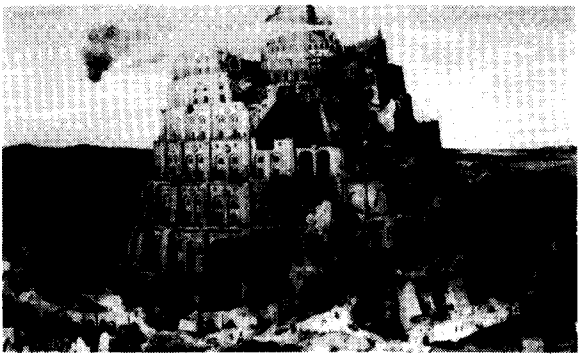

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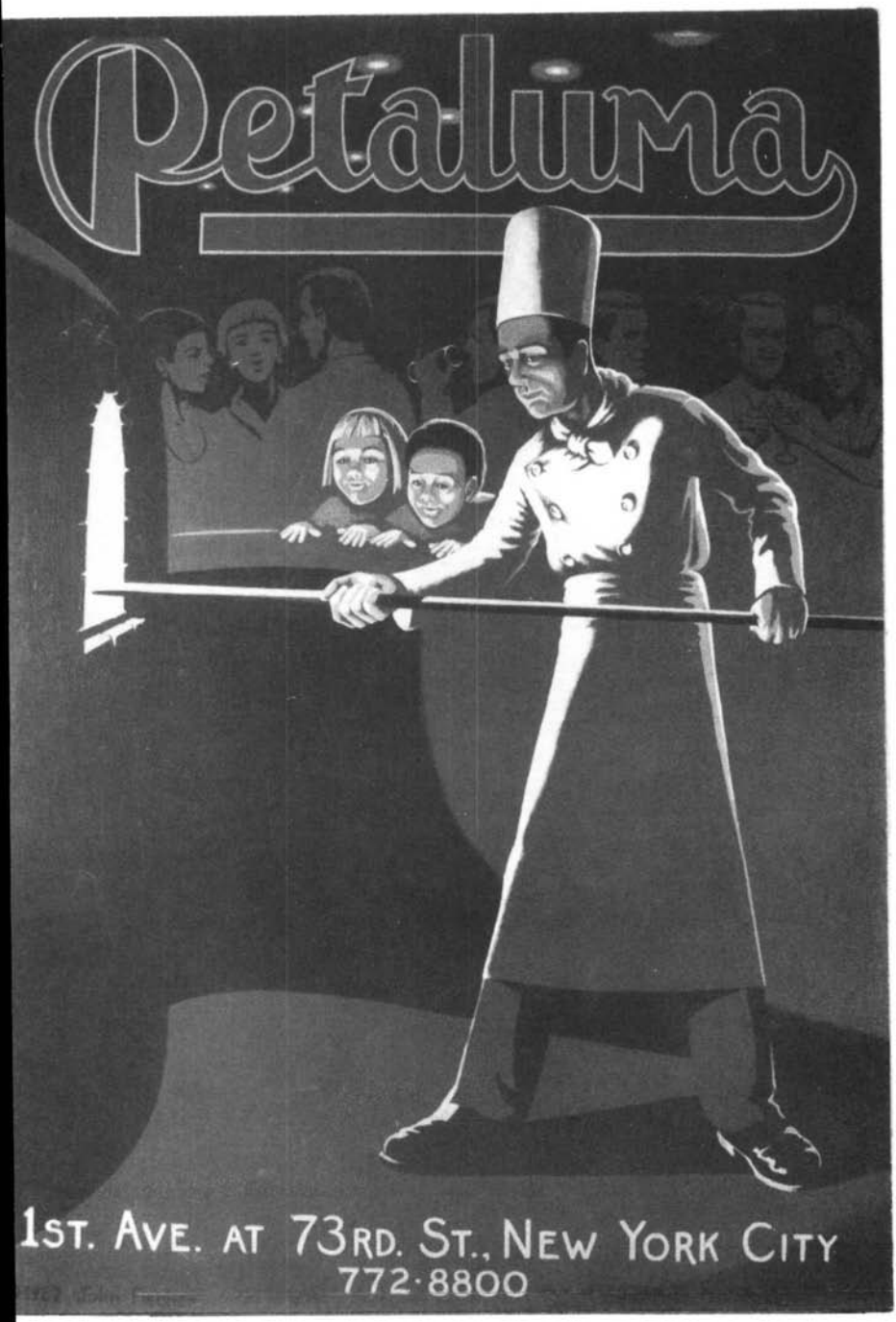

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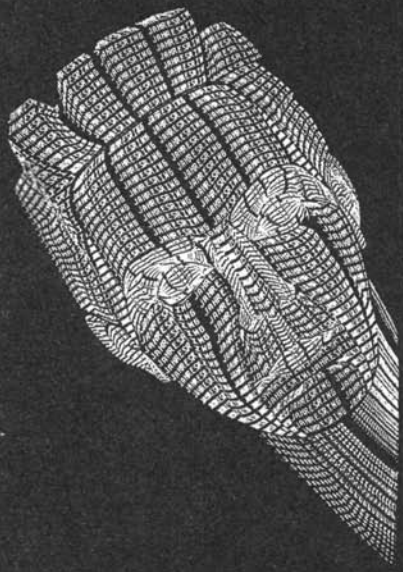

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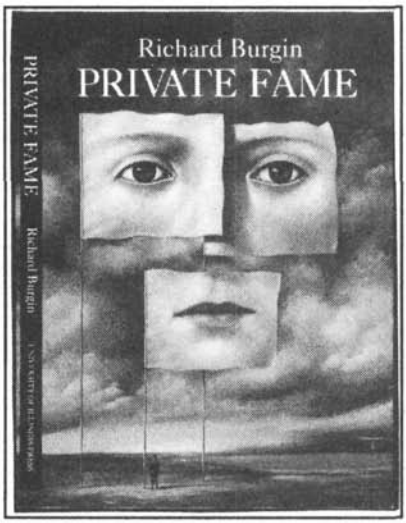

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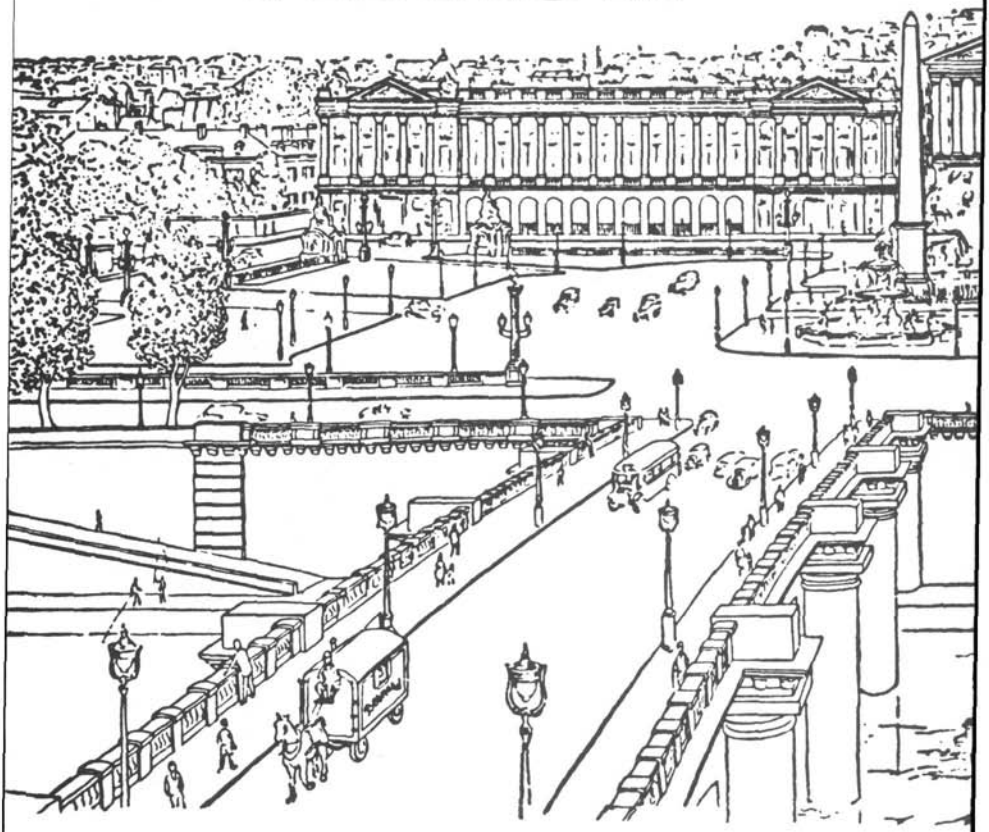

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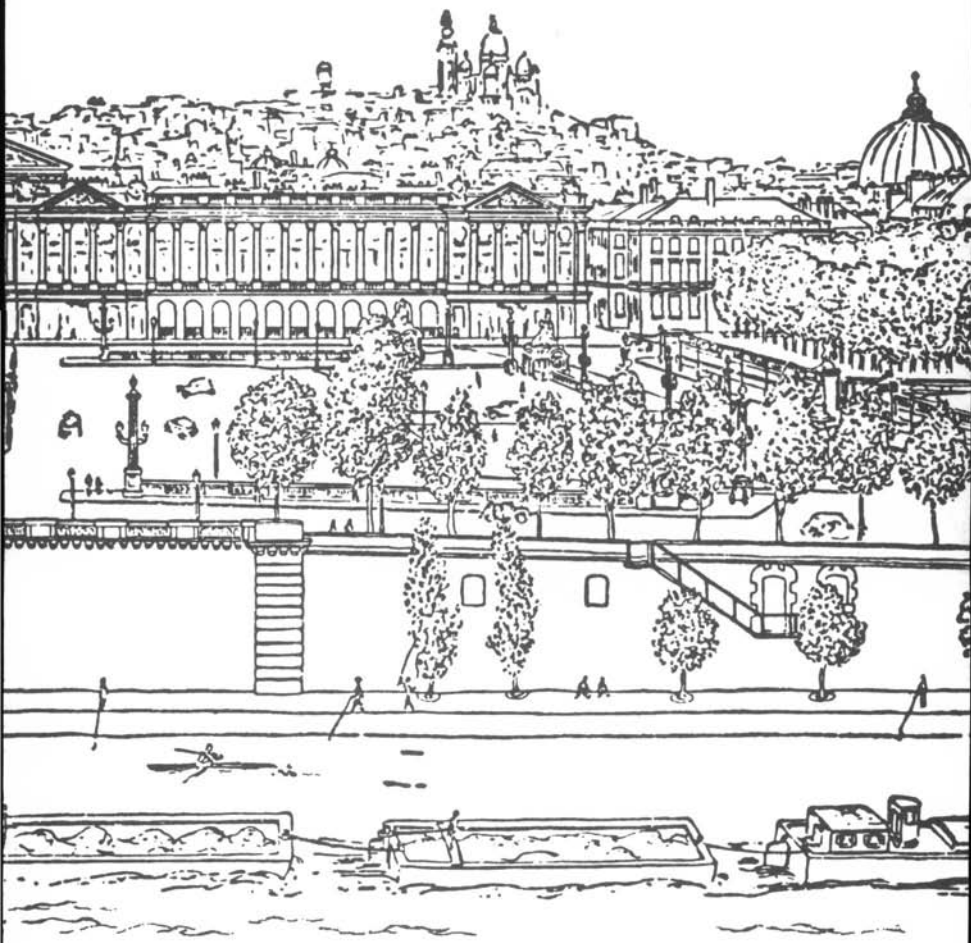

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David Jackson and James Merrill at the Ouija board in Stonington.

The Plato Club

James Merrill and David Jackson

The idea for the following feature evolved from an interview in which David Jackson reported that, using a Ouija board, he and the poet James Merrill had contacted Truman Capote in the afterlife, at a place called the Hedge. The Hedge would seem to be a kind of semipermeable screen through which the dead can peer at human life as well as eavesdrop upon the affairs of a higher heaven that only indirectly concern them. Presiding, as hostess and chief of protocol, is Alice B. Toklas. Since everyone

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wants to talk all at once, she decides—as she did in Gertrude Stein's Parisian salon—who should approach the tea table and in what order. Capote had little to say about his "life" in the other world; heaven was too "black" for him. But he was proud to belong to the Plato Club (founded by its namesake, who periodically looks in) where he and other writers of quality could gossip and worry about their ever-fluctuating reputations on earth. His comments, however few, inspired an editor at the Review, *Antonio Weiss, to write Jackson and Merrill a note suggesting a* Paris Review*-type interview at the Hedge with various writers who had slipped through our fingers over the years—a proposal viewed by some here as too frivolous an exercise for so old and respectable a journal.*

To the editors' surprise and delight, Merrill and Jackson agreed. Last summer, for nine afternoons in a row, they sat down at their Ouija board and with Miss Toklas's flawless instinct to guide them succeeded in capturing quite a pride of literary lions for our pages.

The Ouija board, of course, has been used by Merrill (with Jackson's help) off and on since 1953 when Frederick Buechner gave him one for his birthday. Its most noted manifestation is the book-length trilogy The Changing Light at Sandover, *individual volumes of which won Merrill the Pulitzer Prize (1976), his second National Book Award (1979), and—this time for the completed poem—the National Book Critics' Circle Award in 1983.*

Merrill, in his 1983 Paris Review *interview, described how he and Jackson use their homemade Ouija board (the commercial ones are "too cramped"): "[David] puts his right hand lightly on the cup, I my left, leaving the right to transcribe, and away we go. We get, oh, five hundred to six hundred words an hour. Better than gasoline. . . . David is the subconscious shaper of the message itself, the 'Hand,' as they call him. Of the two of us, he's the spokesman for human nature, while I'm the 'Scribe,' the one in whose words and images the message gets expressed." The resulting transcripts look like "first-grade compositions. Drunken lines of capitals lurching across the page, gibberish until they're divided into words and sentences." The point of all*

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this apparatus was to tap the collective unconscious (thus "multiplying by five," as Victor Hugo said of his *seances, the mediums' natural powers) or simply to be caught up in a process of "thinking, puzzling, resisting, testing the messages against everything we knew or thought possible." For this interview, the all-capital-letters style of the seance transcripts has been replaced with more conventional capitalization, but some other traces of the shades' Ouija-board abbreviations—such as the use of ampersands, initials and numerals—have been retained. Some identifications and editorial comments by Merrill appear in brackets.*

Readers of Sandover *will remember—along with such nonhuman interlocutors as the didactic, easily ruffled peacock Mirabell and Unice the pure-hearted unicorn from Atlantis—a host of distinguished shades: W.H. Auden, Maria Callas, Richard Wagner, Wallace Stevens, not to mention Nefertiti, Homer and many others. In the present interview Miss Toklas has but to say the word and to the Ouija board on a round white table in Connecticut flock Gertrude Stein, Colette, Jean Genet, William Carlos Williams, Elizabeth Bowen and Henry James. Live guests in the Jackson-Merrill household at the time—Skip, an artist, and Harry, a professor of Classics at Washington & Lee—also take a hand in the proceedings. Unice and Mirabell keep an eye on things.*

It should be mentioned that in a letter accompanying the interview Merrill included a mild caveat: "A lot of their talk gave us pause—so much militant sexuality. I suppose I took comfort recalling that in the Tibetan Book of the Dead *souls who haven't attained Nirvana may be beset by visions of copulating figures; these are thought to attend the soul's next incarnation ici-bas."*

July 4, 1991

A brilliant afternoon in Stonington. DJ & JM—Hand and Scribe, as we are known in the other world—at the Ouija board, ready to write down the messages spelt out by the old overturned willowware cup.

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ALICE B. TOKLAS

Dear boys I too am poised with pad & pen.

JAMES MERRILL

Did you follow *The Paris Review* interviews in your lifetime?

TOKLAS

I was on the way out when they began. I know them from periodic references up here. Most writers feel that any (good or bad) publication mentioning or printing their work is highly worthwhile.

DAVID JACKSON

Excuse me, I'm trying to light this cigarette.

MERRILL

Alice understands. She gave up smoking at eighty-six.

TOKLAS

And still look on with envy. Shall we get down to work?

MERRILL

You were with Gertrude Stein when she died. Were those really her last words: "In that case, what is the question?"

TOKLAS

Well it nearly was that.

GERTRUDE STEIN

[*Advancing.*] I stammered you see, & darling Alice put it right.

MERRILL

When we last spoke you said that, after your career as Gertrude Stein, you'd had a brief life as an Argentine

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Alice B. Toklas and Gertrude Stein.

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gaucho "to straighten out your gender." May we hear more about that?

STEIN

It was far rougher than one had foreseen. My poor fundament suffered. Sometimes even the horses seemed oversexed. Yet it shed light upon my buried libido.

MERRILL

Your libido went underground after that early novella, *Things As They Are.* Its Jamesian donnée of American girls abroad didn't keep it from being shot through by moments of uncanny frankness. Some critics wish your later works had carried this further.

STEIN

At that time, dear boy, nobody went (in print) further. In the 20s sex (seemingly free) still had to be hidden under the guise of metaphors & other literary devices. We watch & listen with amazement to current political efforts to "clean up" sex.

MERRILL

After that male life on horseback, do you see yourself as an arbiter of sexual politics, like Tiresias?

STEIN

I feel more like Christopher Columbus. A continent of feminists striving for equality. Though conservative myself, I agree with some of their gender agenda. I would remove words such as *spokesman* from all printed matter & substitute *speaker.*

MERRILL

Do minds change in heaven as they do on earth?

STEIN

Here a sublime opacity reigns, transparent only when focusing on a probable candidate for election to our

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midst. Not well put. I echo poor Wystan in needing pen & paper. Is that not the answer for writers?

MERRILL

What was the question?

STEIN

O dear.

JACKSON

What is your view of Hemingway now?

STEIN

He now hoes a field in Argentina. We did not find him qualified.

JACKSON

You kicked Papa out of Heaven!

MERRILL

He followed you to Paris, why not to the pampas? Was there a scene? Who is "we"?

STEIN

Much huffing & puffing, but the big bad wolf exited with a most female shriek. In the case of writers "we" are a revolving committee. Currently: Me, Plato, Sophocles, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bowen, Cocteau & Henry James.

MERRILL

Who appoints the Committee—Mother Nature?

STEIN

The Mother of us all (blessed be Her name) is quite indifferent to human matters unless, as in the case of the rain forest, they impede natural activity. The next Committee will be chosen by us. Us, do you hear! Alice often

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cluck-clucks when we refuse entrance as with Himingway [*sic*] But I say "Dear girl, heaven is not for the shouters."

MERRILL

Who was on the Committee when you died?

STEIN

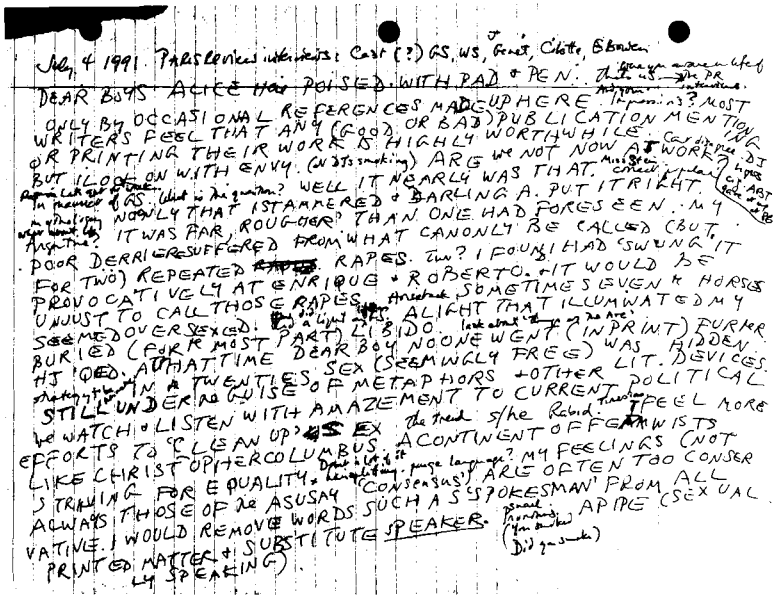
Emily Brontë & naturally our most prestigious . . . guess?

MERRILL

Tolstoy? . . . Jack London? . . . George Eliot?

STEIN

Bingo!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OR PRINTING THEIR WORK IS HIGHLY WORTHWHILE [illegible]
BUT I LOOK ON WITH ENVY. (NO BS smoking) ARE WE NOT NOW AT WORK?
In manner of GS. What is the question? WELL IT NEARLY WAS THAT.
NOWLY THAT I STAMMERED & DARLING A. PUT IT RIGHT.
IT WAS FAR, ROUGHER THAN ONE HAD FORESEEN. MY
POOR DERRIERE SUFFERED FROM WHAT CANONLY BE CALLED CBUT.
FOR TWO) REPEATED RAPES. RAPES. Tm? I FOUND I HAD SWUNG IT
PROVOCATIVELY AT ENRIQUE & ROBERTO. IT WOULD BE
UNJUST TO CALL THOSE RAPES. SOMETIMES SEVEN & HORSES
SEEMED OVER SEXED. ALIGHT THAT ILLUMINATED MY
BURIED (FAR MOST PART) LIBIDO. NO ONE WENT (IN PRINT) FURTHER
HJ QED. AT THAT TIME DEAR BOY NO ONE WENT (IN PRINT) HIDDEN
IN A TWENTIES OF METAPHORS & OTHER POLITICAL
STILL UNDER A GUISE OF METAPHORS & OTHER POLITICAL
WITH AMAZEMENT TO CURRENT I FEEL MORE
WATCH & LISTEN WITH AMAZEMENT TO CURRENT I FEEL MORE
EFFORTS TO 'CLEAN UP' SEX. A CONTINENT OFF FAWISTS
LIKE CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS. MY FEELINGS (NOT
STRIVING FOR EQUALITY, 'CONSENSUS') ARE OFTEN TOO CONSER
ALWAYS THOSE OF DE ASUSAY. I WOULD REMOVE WORDS SUCH AS 'SPOKESMAN' FROM ALL
VATIVE. I WOULD REMOVE WORDS SUCH AS 'SPOKESMAN' FROM ALL
PRINTED MATTER & SUBSTITUTE SPEAKER. APIPE (SEXUAL
LY SPEAKING)

A transcript from the first Ouija-board session of this interview.

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MERRILL

Which of your works do you still care for?

STEIN

I think a little-known volume of poetry: *Stanzas in Meditation*?

MERRILL

Oh yes—a favorite of John Ashbery's. I've glanced at it.

STEIN

Naughty Scribe. These speak, as does all poetry worth reading, from the heart & are regulated by rhythm & form.

SKIP

[*Speaking up.*] How do you feel about the destruction of the traditional center of art in our century? Abstract expressionism was out to eradicate the center—an impossible task, since the center is an omniscient essence, like a Tibetan mandala, infinite yet constricted, which isn't to say—

STEIN

Who has been listening?

MERRILL

Let me present our houseguest, a young painter.

STEIN

In art there has never been a center, only a perhaps. If we speak of "centers" I think of the human mind, asleep or awake. In my time we never mentioned "centers." The word suggested genitalia.

SKIP

Like your rose?

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STEIN

The rose (a piece I am fearfully bored by) is in effect the mind.

JACKSON

Was *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* written by you or by Alice?

STEIN

By us. She holding the pencil would say "Now let us (us!) take up your food problem." My part was looking at her sweet face bent over writing & thanking whomever for her being. Result: Some pages about A's cooking.

JACKSON

Is there anything you'd like us to ask?

STEIN

"How do you feel, Miss Stein, about the new French prime minister?" Answer: MSerable. She is, as are I must say most Frenchwomen, hopelessly female: not prolesbian (even though vast numbers practice it). Why even Margaret Thatcher allowed her husband to photograph her kissing her cook. It was not a comradely kiss.

MERRILL

What corners of the United States do you keep an eye on?

STEIN

New York, San Francisco . . . I look for signs of human compassion. It delights me to see the homeless cuddled together for warmth.

JACKSON

You're delighted by their plight?

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MERRILL

No, no. It's not the homelessness that delights her but—

STEIN

Not so fast, JM. It is a statement, strong & effective, about capitalism. The statement will not be heard for 10 years. Then the politics will change & the world will be much warmer.

JACKSON

She's talking about the greenhouse effect?

STEIN

Yes. We devised it (rather, Mr. Auden devised it) as a warning. [*W.H. Auden, instead of being reincarnated or sitting on committees, bequeathed his poetic energies to the mineral or geological realms. The rise in volcanic activity over the past years is, for example, his doing.*] Not the end of the world. Mr. A. will stop the polar melt in time, & meanwhile the causes dramatically staged will have disappeared.

JACKSON

It's true, you know. I read that volcanic ash in the atmosphere serves as a cooling agent. So God doesn't mean to polish off the earth?

MERRILL

Shouldn't we steer clear of theology?

STEIN

Let Miss Stein summarize! a) God Biology did indeed create our world but his sister, Nature, rules it. b) Their most prized (ahem) creations move upward to heaven. Others are reborn. c) The system of reincarnation is therefore correct. Period.

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MERRILL

I only meant that in this interview the spotlight would be trained to better effect on yourself than on the universe.

STEIN

Do admit it reveals a charming microcosm. [*Sweeps out.*]

JACKSON

Is Alice still with us?

TOKLAS

With pencil & pad. Dear Jamey & Mr. Livingstone [*Her name for David Jackson.*] ask her tomorrow about Colette. We like your artist friend. A demain.

UNICE

[*Our unicorn gatekeeper.*] Sirs! I have been eavesdropping & must add that I for one would love Miss Stein on my back, even with a whip!

July 5

MERRILL

How come Alice has pencil and paper and not you?

STEIN

Alice did all the paperwork. I dictated, she criticized. My modus was often non-operandi. My dear one would say "We stopped at 'near.' Go on!" I was & am (as Alice says) vastly egocentric.

MERRILL

How much ego should a writer have?

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STEIN

Quantities.

MERRILL

Alice, do you agree?

TOKLAS

Now, my dear boy, most of GS's writings sprang from a rural American past.

MERRILL

Her life never sounded very rural to me. Childhood years in Europe, Harvard with Santayana and William James . . . Or are we talking about an idyllic vision? The ego-nurturing conversational eternity of a back porch overlooking—

STEIN

Ha ha, cornfields! Do not forget the Paris atmosphere. Like the beatniks we saw literary life as commercially motivated & tried to untie that anchor. Language back then was lashed to advertising, political rhetoric & nonsense. We (and I mean all of the 20s world of creativity) tried to use words to really say something hard & nasty.

MERRILL

Hardness and nastiness become devices, too. Sometimes I suspect that the intensest readers of the avant-garde are copywriters.

STEIN

We knew they were. They didn't copy Henry James though, did they? Too high a style even for them. I once met him, you know. I said: "Master (he loved that), we think you should not hide your leanings."

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MERRILL

Did he love that?

STEIN

I think for the first & only time in his life he did a naughty thing. He turned, bent over & said "Kiss it."

MERRILL

Oh, come *on!*

STEIN

O yes. Witnessed by a room full of people including darling Colette who approached him later & was heard to say: "Cher maître, votre derrière n'est pas mal."

JACKSON

Let's hear more about Colette. *There* was a Frenchwoman who came out of the closet.

STEIN

I must admit (dear Alice knows this) she dazzled me. So marvelously irreverent. When the childish Academy was floundering around looking for "acceptable" male members she would send anonymous letters suggesting well-known queer performers. She persuaded some of us to make bonnets out of newspaper (the critical pages) and mail them to the Academy members.

JACKSON

I suppose the bonnets were ignored.

STEIN

No. A week later Colette received an anonymous top hat which she wore endlessly in cafés.

JACKSON

You've stayed in posthumous touch?

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STEIN

O yes. She is a part-time member of the Plato Club. She says all organizations & the time given them must be limited.

MERRILL

Did you like her books?

STEIN

She is/was a masteress.

MERRILL

Goodness, yes. *Dialogues des Bêtes?* She's inside the mind of those dogs and cats. How does she do it?

STEIN

We often joked that in a previous life she was a Scotch terrier & then horrors! found that she had been. Not a Scotch terrier but a bull.

MERRILL

How many lives back?

STEIN

One. Colette was her only human incarnation. Her former owner had been an English clergyman who practiced degrading things on her while reciting the psalms. When she discovered this (up here) she assumed a dog-begging position & arfed out "Le Seigneur est mon berger."

MERRILL

Good training for her first marriage. Not to mention the literary background. Did you and she learn from each other as writers?

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STEIN

She taught me to look at words as musical notes. For example *rose* was middle C.

MERRILL

And a rose with a thorn, C sharp?

STEIN

Exactly. And I taught her to repeat. As a frog she had been taught that the French language was holy. I said "Ma chère, if language is your church you had better start singing in it." The poor thing was bound to fashion, but even poor things change, and her last 2 works were & are musical.

MERRILL

The Blue Lantern and *The Evening Star?*

STEIN

Yes. Let me summon her.

MERRILL

Madame Colette? Quel honneur pour nous!

COLETTE

Ah oui? Et pour moi quel plaisir.

MERRILL

We'd better switch to English. You're at the mercy of our very spotty French.

COLETTE

Not at all. Your French is fascinating, a totally unique language.

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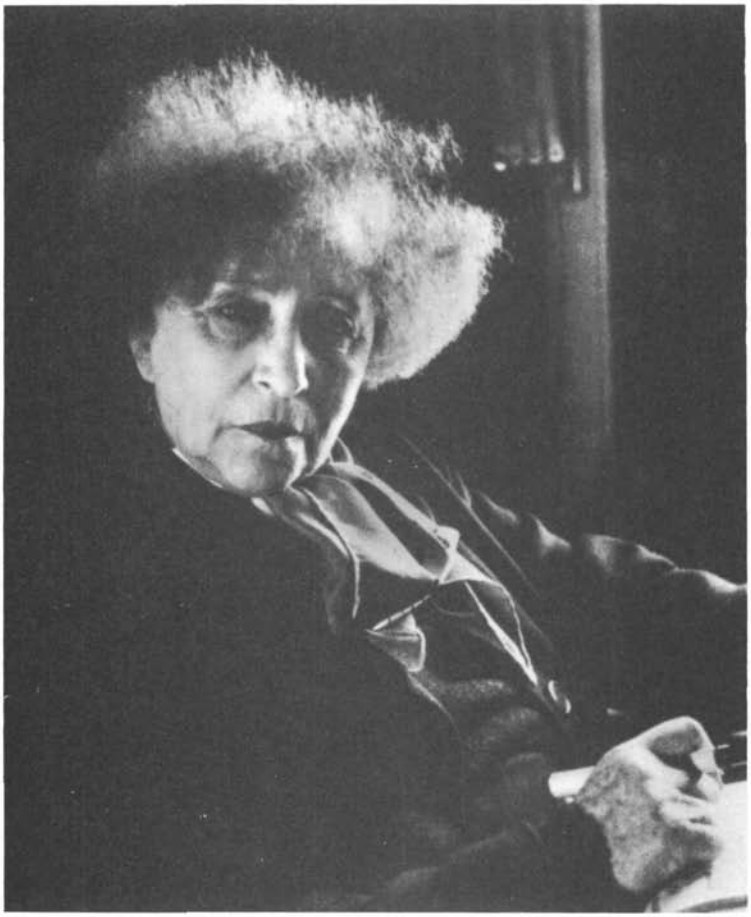

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Colette

MERRILL

You understand, it's an interview. The emphasis will be on your life as a writer. Shoptalk, anything you like—

COLETTE

I never talked shop. Miss Stein said "Talking shop is being a shopkeeper."

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MERRILL

What then?

COLETTE

Gossip! Have you heard the exact words Hemingway uttered when he met the laughing Entrance Committee? "I don't get the joke." Miss Stein smiled: "You."

JACKSON

I don't get *this* joke. Why is Gertrude so down on Hemingway?

MERRILL

Oh, you know, because he formed aspects of his style on hers and then attacked her after her death—those awful pages in *A Moveable Feast*, remember? Is Mlle. Colette still with us? What was it like to work with Ravel?

COLETTE

Ravel worshiped Debussy & I think perhaps curbed his own style in favor of the master's. He forewent abstraction & pursued pastiche. I told him one day while we "worked" (he on the bottom for a change) "Poor Maurice, you must either do to Claude what you are now doing to me or try to turn your (covered) back on him."

MERRILL

Very sensational, very French.

COLETTE

We after all taught you proper kissing. Ravel outlived Debussy & finally shook off much of D's impressionism.

JACKSON

He didn't shake off Stravinsky. I just read a piece about their having to share a bed in a crowded Swiss town.

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COLETTE

Maurice told a friend "Igor is very well endowed, I mean musically."

MERRILL

I must say, I don't recall such relentless sexual content in our seances of fifteen years ago. I'm beginning to think it stems from the geriatric fantasies of someone at this table.

COLETTE

(Hush, Scribe.)

MERRILL

You knew Proust, of course.

COLETTE

As well as anyone could. He was a sad mamma's boy. We all adored his work. But except for the housekeeper-cook the poor wretch knew no women.

MERRILL

Those society beauties? Mme. de Chevigné?

COLETTE

The countess was a drag queen, a detesticated youth who wore women's clothes from age 14.

JACKSON

How did he get married?

COLETTE

The count was a great ravager of boys whose father (deeply ashamed) forced him to take a wife. She/he was in fact quite noble but his/her father drove him/her out.

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MERRILL

Here we are back at gender and language. You're inventing delicious fictions—I hope!—to dramatize their interaction.

COLETTE

Let us then speak tomorrow on nonsexual subjects (if we can). Au plaisir.

July 6

UNICE

Sirs! Ah Mlle. Colette, she could ride me sidesaddle. She flirts & I love it.

MERRILL

How do our friends look?

UNICE

Colette is 22, très chic in a suit of pale yellow silk by Schiaparelli, with blond bobbed hair. Miss Stein is . . . 30? Wearing denim coveralls over a rather garish checkered shirt.

JACKSON

And Alice?

UNICE

As always demure in a smock made of gingham.

JACKSON

It just occurs to me—remember the horsehair sofa in rue Christine? I wonder how Uni feels about that.

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UNICE

I am thrilled that my race had a spot in such a parlor.

COLETTE

[*Gliding in.*] Ton morceau de sucre, ma beauté?

MERRILL

We were wondering what in life distressed you most.

COLETTE

A girlhood crush which turned out badly. Total rejection. For 6 years I could not even entertain the hope of meeting another. In time came my major bête noire.

MERRILL

Proust says that the truths we learn when a lover leaves us are worth far more than the love itself.

COLETTE

Not in my case. It gave me a false message: "You, my girl, are not desirable."

JACKSON

Who was the bête noire?

MERRILL

Willy. That third-rate novelist she married? He saw what a gold mine she was and exploited her horribly—even to signing her books with his name.

COLETTE

But I must admit he began my life of writing. I would perhaps have ended up as a model. I loved being looked at. Directors kept shouting "Non, non, non! Pas ici! Pas maintenant!" I was the first female to strip totally on stage. The public flocked. But when I turned to writing they remembered & dismissed my work as trivial. Not,

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shall we say, clothed in a sufficient style. So you see, I & my friends were *also* revolutionaries!

MERRILL

Not just Miss Stein and her friends. I do see. But did you think of your books as revolutionary?

COLETTE

I meant them to be. Do not forget you read them after thirty years of real revolution.

MERRILL

And what most distresses you in life seen from your present vantage?

COLETTE

Animal torture & inhumanity mostly. The senior poet [*Auden again—what isn't he into?*] has come up with a splendid & difficult idea: to make gradual genetic adjustments in the animal world, resulting in species totally unrelated to the human being, therefore useless for experiment in the eyes of corporate funding. Looking & behaving just the same but with no comparable cell structure.

MERRILL

Hmm . . . Being part animal is too good for the average man?

COLETTE

Tortured (as I was in my bulldog life) by someone who loved me & whom I loved, I was at least able to make the transition to full humanity in a single incarnation. Not so the slaughtered rats & monkeys who fill the gutters of your ghettos & the pockets of your drug lords. I am with Miss Stein in her concern for the minorities, the homeless & unfed.

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MERRILL

This is Genet's world, isn't it? Homeless himself, criminal, in love with Blacks, Arabs, Palestinians. He carried the revolution beyond language or manners. You knew him?

COLETTE

We all worshiped him. It was marvelous; as we stood protesting outside his prison Genet would appear in one window after another being chased by guards & discarding his uniform until voilà! There he was laughing stark naked on a ledge. He was a hero, although what suffered I believe was his work. It became increasingly histrionic.

MERRILL

One of the pitfalls of fame and age. You avoided it beautifully. (Help—I'm running out of questions.)

JACKSON

What do *you* think of France's Prime Minister?

COLETTE

A nonfemale. She has consistently used her gender to rise to power & then put it down to conform to capitalists.

JACKSON

We didn't know you were so political.

MERRILL

The last play you saw was *The Madwoman of Chaillot.*

COLETTE

I am & was communist. Politics is the rarest form of human expression. It begins in the needs of people & races and moves subtly to the needs of leaders. It is very much like romantic love. Once the love object becomes a sexual outlet, the balance of power shifts. Leaders (look at today's world) see the people as *their* release, not

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themselves releasing the people. Unfortunately Marx & Lenin have been left behind.

JACKSON

Lenin's being blamed for everything.

COLETTE

His history is that of victim to the very end. He protested Bolshevik treatment of Marx's ideas & was ignored & finally murdered. Yes, yes. Smothered while sedated by opium.

JACKSON

[*Coughing.*] I never heard that!

COLETTE

History is a labyrinth of distortion & pressures. One day pure leaderless communism will transpire. I must now return you to Ms. Alice. Au revoir et bonne chance.

TOKLAS

Mr. Livingstone, we have inspected your lungs & found you are unique: You have developed a third lung. Next Genet? But at present he is in Committee work.

MERRILL

He's on the Committee, too? Who's being discussed? Someone we know?

JACKSON

Howard Nemerov?

TOKLAS

Yes.

MERRILL

Oh, he's bound to get in, don't you think?

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TOKLAS

The majority like his work. But Gertrude is putting on airs. This Committee is her power trip; she antagonizes [*pianissimo*] Mother Nature.

MERRILL

Their voices are sometimes hard to tell apart.

TOKLAS

Indeed. So it is for me to put poor dear Gertrude down.

MERRILL

You told us once about cutting off her long hair—how gently you did it, getting her used to its absence. A Delilah like you can certainly do that trick again.

TOKLAS

Now, now. What she needs is a scalping! But knowing her, she will find a gorgeous wig & carry on. Until tomorrow. I will be sure to have M. Genet ready. Dear twinkly-eyed Mirabell is peering over the Hedge & getting nasty looks from Committee members.

JACKSON

We love you, Mirabell!

MIRABELL

(And I you but shh!)

July 7

UNICE

Monsieur Jean Genet!

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GENET

Ah chers amis! I would adore knowing about the "scene."

MERRILL

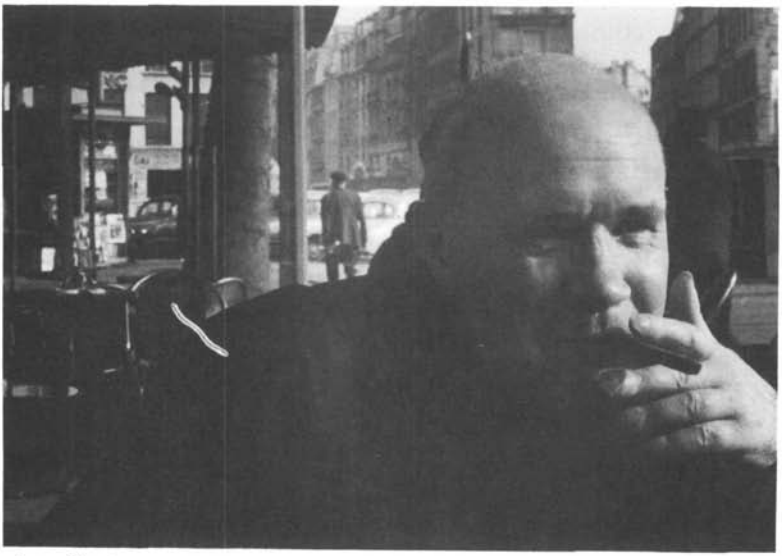
Well, this is the dining room of David's and my house in Connecticut. The tin dome overhead is really why we're here. That big white tower next door used to be a Baptist church.

GENET

No, I meant boys. In your country today.

MERRILL

Oh. Well, you could begin by reading the complete works of your biographer, Edmund White. That will tell you more than we possibly could. He, by the way, showed me the first half of his manuscript. Have you been following it? Are you pleased?



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Jean Genet

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GENET

Very. My one objection is that, being an excellent biographer, he sees the punishment of my "indiscretions" as French bigotry rather than the answer to my prayers. My whole life (as the enchantress Colette said) was spent trying to attract attention, as only an orphaned child would.

JACKSON

He was an orphan?

MERRILL

From the age of . . . six months, I think. His foster parents weren't peasants. They saw to his schooling and gave him a stable home life. Did he begin stealing then? I can't recall.

GENET

Yes! They did not understand my terrible need for love. So I "stole" but always left a clue & waited for one or the other to take me in his or her arms & say: Pauvre enfant, je comprends.

MERRILL

So do we.

GENET

I spotted my first gorgeous male sailor once when I ran away to Marseilles. He was shirtless & urinating over the side.

JACKSON

How old were you?

GENET

A stripling of 12. To attract his attention I crept up & took a perch from his fish pail, making sure my boot struck its side. He turned, I saw his beautiful member &

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fell on my knees. He came to me, took me by the shoulders & rubbed my face against it. I moaned with joy & tried to get it in my mouth but he cunningly dodged until I said "Please, please." And he turned & said "Follow me." We went below. There he made me do unspeakable (I joke) acts and then called a passing friend in. Before the afternoon passed, 5 members had crossed my lips. My life was set.

MERRILL

Committee members must be poor company by comparison.

GENET

Yes. I think of returning to earth, as a fisherman's son! A sexless heaven is boring. I try to enliven our meetings but for the most part am tenderly hushed. Before us now is your friend [*Howard Nemerov*], a seemingly straight man. But I did manage to force an admission from him that he had once had great pleasure while on his back.

MERRILL

If you meet in order to determine what writers enter heaven, or remain there, why is sex an issue at all?

GENET

We must find out how much knowledge each nominee holds. A chaste, sexually ignorant candidate would be useless to us.

MERRILL

Why?

GENET

Because human life springs from sex & gender!

MERRILL

George Eliot judged by different standards.

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GENET

By ours, & the splendid Ms. Stein's, very sorry ones. Henry James for example struck many as cold & Victorian, but we divined correctly that he was sex-obsessed. He knew every male & female whore in London & Paris.

MERRILL

Words fail us. Go on.

JACKSON

You were wonderfully well preserved as an older man, to judge from photographs.

GENET

Incessant beauty applications. Even in prison I made mudpacks. They nicknamed me Dirtface. Prison was bliss. My escapade described by Mlle. Colette was really like my crying: See, see, see! I am available!

MERRILL

And was fame, when it came, just another form of haute surveillance?

GENET

Indeed. It certainly pimped for me.

MERRILL

What is the relation between sex and language?

GENET

Language on paper is like semen. It is an effort by the writer to be a father or a mother, even those who (fortunately or otherwise) are. When the writer is a woman this inner animus is male. When a man, it is like a fetus emerging, with or without pain.

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JACKSON

In short, creativity.

GENET

Not quite so curt, Hand. In short, a short story or lyric. At length *The Making of Americans.* [*DJ coughs.*] Hand, my cough?

MERRILL

Your cough?

GENET

Sounded like mine. Not just from cigarettes, from overexcitement. In the midst of orgasm I'd cough to such an extent that often my partner ejaculated simply from my body spasms.

MERRILL

Have you particular affection for one of your books?

GENET

No. I feel each was spat out.

MERRILL

They read as if they'd been a pleasure to write. Weren't they?

GENET

Yes. But the thrill was to anticipate their acceptance, even more, their rejection by so-called serious readers & critics.

MERRILL

Like Colette being patronized. Because she'd appeared nude on stage her books had to be trivial. Because you were a criminal and a pervert your style couldn't be lucid. Doesn't one love to impersonate the kind of writer

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people dismiss? Those who take us at face value—into the shredder with them! We must keep testing our readers.

GENET

Exactly. The true writers always test, the nonwriters do not. Are we being literary enough?

JACKSON

You certainly remained pretty sexy throughout your life.

GENET

Very few complaints. Only one: Proust. Met by chance at le comte de Pérignon. A wine-family fortune. This their oldest son was on the point of being disowned when at an all-boy party he introduced me to a stiff-necked young man: "Marcel—Jean."

MERRILL

Wait a minute—how old were you?

GENET

I was 16. Marcel . . . 35?

MERRILL

You've gone too far. Proust was thirty-five when you were *born.* By the time you were sixteen he'd been dead for several years.

GENET

[*Waving aside the indictment, as in life.*] In short, I found him a challenge & he me, an urchin. We found ourselves in a coach house where our host told us to meet him prior to a ride through the Bois. Once there I boldly said: "Marcel, es-tu bien monté?" He turned his head away.

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JACKSON

("Es-tu bien monté?" I don't get it.)

MERRILL

("Are you my cup of tea?")

GENET

I reached for his pants. He did not move. I withdrew what seemed to me a small affair. He still did not look, but the small affair now became a grande fête in my hand. Still not looking he took hold of mine & said (to my dismay): Mais vous êtes un enfant! I could only continue my massage. He sighed & groaned & shot a fountain whereupon le comte appeared: "Finis?"

MERRILL

Thank you for this illustration of your inventive powers.

GENET

The pleasure was mine. A demain.

TOKLAS

You quite thrilled our urchin.

JACKSON

How did he look?

TOKLAS

37 but looking 19. He chose to come unclothed.

STEIN

Ask Jean about his work for he constantly belittles it. Nemerov admitted to stage three. He seemed not pleased. His final word: "Keep an eye on me, I may just knot my sheets together and shinny back down."

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JACKSON

Sheets?

MERRILL

Worksheets, I imagine. Have you met him, Uni?

UNICE

Yes & taken him riding! Until tomorrow. Thank you for letting me eavesdrop!

July 8

Present today is our friend Harry, a professor of philosophy in Virginia.

GENET

Alors, continuons.

MERRILL

Did you find working in the theater more rewarding than writing novels?

GENET

Much more creative & alive. And ahem, the casting!

MERRILL

The improvisations, the happy accidents, the joy of hearing a voice not your own speaking your lines . . .

GENET

It was and is my life. One day a year (your time) the Plato Club produces a pageant. Strangely, Mother Nature loves it. She constantly advocates live, moving shrubs & trees. I wrote a tree dance: Shake those branches, rub those leaves, twine those twigs & make us leave! (A finale.) On the human side Ms. Alice loves dressing as a peasant girl. She does a bewitching dance with milk pails on her wee shoulders: Wiggle, wiggle, my

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milk turns to cream & I adore it, listen to me scream, and then she yodels! Miss Stein challenges all males to an arm-wrestling match & wins (although Henry James says he threw the match). I have twice yearly produced plays.

MERRILL

About?

GENET

Sex & love & chicanery.

JACKSON

[*Producing a Colorado newspaper photo of his second cousin, 26, in wig and miniskirt, arrested for "criminal impersonation" of a cheerleader.*] What do you think of this young man?

GENET

Not beautiful. He might impersonate our prime minister.

MERRILL

I felt we'd be hearing about her. Do you agree with Colette and Gertrude?

GENET

I do, but say in her favor she performs so vigorously that a 58-year-old senator had a heart attack.

MERRILL

What was your first piece of writing?

GENET

I was a kind of stableboy in the household of a millionaire. He frequently summoned one or more of us to sleep in his bed & before would elaborately wash us. My first erection had him on his knees, thrilled. I was 13. I would peer into his shelves & one day discovered a blank note-

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book. I stole a piece of charcoal & began filling its pages with symbols, for example, those parts of the horse I most disliked: hooves, anus & hair. I slowly realized that women's hair was part of the whole human charade, their feet stepped like hooves upon the necks of men & their vaginas. . . .

MERRILL

That will do.

GENET

In short I realized I was not a woman lover. As my shaky vocabulary began strengthening I would write a word & put a number over it, the page number of the symbol. My setting sun was a line with an arc. In later life foreign alphabets came easily to me. Greek, Arabic . . .

MERRILL

And your first piece of "composed" writing?

GENET

A small vignette about a street vendor refusing (as he had not eaten) to part with his last pear, resulting in a tumultuous scene ending with the arrival of a gendarme & the vendor stuffing the pear into his mouth while the irate customer distracted the policeman, then shrugging (& swallowing surreptitiously) until the complaining woman, pounding her cane, had to be led away. I called it "Triumph." It was published in a small Parisian newspaper as a news item, & from that moment I realized the power of, and the demand for, the written word. The editor summoned me & was astonished to see a "child" appear: "Vous, vous, vous êtes Monsieur Genet?" I threw back my quite broad shoulders and replied: "Oui, moi, moi, moi!" I was hired to "produce news." My first (unknown) book was a collection of these stories, titled *De la tête*.

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JACKSON

Did you sign it? Is it findable?

GENET

Yes & yes. The latest copy sold at auction for 250,000 francs.

MERRILL

So it *is* known.

GENET

Yes. But unknown.

HARRY

Do you remember reading Genet's account of those Chicago riots in 1968? He covered them for . . . was it *Esquire?* He was struck by how snappy the cops looked.

GENET

Your attractive guest is quite right. More interesting yet was one of those fierce policemen in my hotel room, moaning: "Yes, yes, Carmela . . ." He told me his wife tickled him in his genitals when she wanted a new dress.

JACKSON

Carmela was his wife?

GENET

So I assumed. (Wait! His daughter!)

JACKSON

Had you no sympathy for the demonstrators?

GENET

They could have learned much from General Colette. How to taunt. How to pack ice: wait until the crushed cubes just solidify, then a savage toss. Many a broken gendarme-nose.

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MERRILL

What a sheltered life I've led.

JACKSON

You could have coached the demonstrators yourself. Running from window to window in that prison.

GENET

But mostly I was attracting prisoner no. 16438 and succeeding. My prison life showed me the key to human love. For the human is caged in increasingly tough bonds of stupid morality & enforced shame. The release of even a brief fling makes the blood flow again. [*Pause.*] I have dwelt too long on sex & pranks & fairy tales. As for my writing, it was only for money & acclaim.

MERRILL

Ah, don't run yourself down.

GENET

Au contraire, c'est le système. As a poet do you not even slightly despise the printed word? As it serves only as a substitute for the human voice, I would like choruses in the sweat lodge, in the souk! Chanting at leaders, preferably against!

HARRY

How do you see your reputation after death?

GENET

Exaggerated. And as I left no heirs it irritates me to see publishers profit, as it does GS & Colette & Ms. Alice. All of us.

MERRILL

The Committee is childless?

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GENET

Yes. One of the requisites. It leaves us free to look hard & long at submissions & at their makers not as indulgent parents but tough word processors.

JACKSON

Sounds grim.

GENET

Not a bit. The Plato Club is the gayest in the universe.

MERRILL

Is there a rival club?

GENET

Yes. They call themselves the "Family."

MERRILL

I'm afraid it's time to adjourn.

GENET

Tomorrow I am supplanted by Wallace Stevens.

JACKSON

At last, a family man . . .

MERRILL

We'll talk again? Au revoir. [*Impulsively kisses the cup.*]

TOKLAS

O Jamey that was sweet. I felt it too, although Jean thrust me aside.

JACKSON

[*Not to be outdone.*] Here's a kiss just for you, Alice.

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Stein & Toklas

MERRILL

Taste the nicotine?

TOKLAS

With enchantment. Next, Mr. Stevens. Then Elizabeth Bowen who also claims your acquaintance.

JACKSON

Yes, she had lunch in this room once. She signed our guestbook.

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TOKLAS

A demain. A kiss for you both & my astonishment that we did not kiss before.

July 9

Harry has set up his tripod and prepares to photograph us at the board.

TOKLAS

Now as an unexpected entr'acte you will meet (for he claims you did not in life) Mr. Williams.

MERRILL

Tennessee? We knew Tennessee . . . Charles? Fascinating novels—a bit too mystical, perhaps.

JACKSON

William Carlos?

TOKLAS

Yes.

MERRILL

Oh, *Doctor* Williams. No, we never met in life, but he looked at my throat a few years ago and was very kind and helpful. How are you, Sir?

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

Rather miffed at being excluded.

MERRILL

From the Committee?

WILLIAMS

And the interview.

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MERRILL

You mean *The Paris Review* never—? Oh dear, what an oversight.† I wish I'd . . . Well, please make yourself at home. Maybe you'll materialize in one of Harry's photographs.

WILLIAMS

As a lifted nose. What I have seen & heard so far makes me think it is a purely sexual symposium.

MERRILL

I couldn't agree more. Do help us towards a more balanced view.

WILLIAMS

Mostly homosexual. Sad. I feel the heterosexual is being maligned. As a child I overheard & peeked at my parents making (as I, I, I like to call it) love & was most enchanted. Just as my father peaked I let out a squeal of delight & of course was sent back to my bed but the memory lingered & caused many a 14-year-old erection. So do you not think, before you go further (having already gone too far) you should cool out the steam room & give equal time to the majority? Homosex is not the real world.

MERRILL

Really? Where do you draw the line?

JACKSON

He's speaking as a homophobe.

WILLIAMS

Correct!

†In fact, William Carlos Williams was interviewed (*Paris Review*, no. 76, *Writers at Work*, vol. 3) but had suffered a mild stroke not long before, which might account for this lapse of memory.—ED.

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JACKSON

Shame on you.

WILLIAMS

No, shame on you!

JACKSON

He sounds madly prejudiced.

MERRILL

Let him have his say. It's a free country.

WILLIAMS

A mistake! I have long felt that American literature has given too much attention to homo-poets. Reason? Publishers & public seeking perverse thrills.

JACKSON

Too bad. Perhaps the stuff you wrote could have been a bit more thrilling? How do you see straight poetry regaining its—

WILLIAMS

Censorship. As is now being debated in Congress.

JACKSON

Jesse Helms!

WILLIAMS

Unfortunately he is our spokesman.

JACKSON

I'm speechless. You don't sound like a doctor. You must be crazy!

MERRILL

(A pure product of America?) Let's not squabble, please. Have your say.

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WILLIAMS

Thank you, Scribe. Here goes. Each of you had heterosexual fathers & mothers. Otherwise, no you. [*Satisfied pause.*]

MERRILL

That's all? What kind of argument is that? I chose to give to my friends and to my work the time I might have given to a family.

WILLIAMS

Your work is a substitute for children.

MERRILL

If you like. Actually, the substitution delights me. My books don't take drugs or carry switchblades or need abortions. Besides, I have the occasional "virtual child" in a student or reader glad to learn the very things I happen to know.

WILLIAMS

Bravo! Spoken like a true selfish queer. Renegades! Expatriates!

JACKSON

Oh, you're intolerable!

MERRILL

What can he mean? We're as American as lemon chiffon pie.

WILLIAMS

Why wasn't I included?

MERRILL

How do you expect us to know? You have your admirers and disciples, tens of thousands of them. Let *them* interview you.

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WILLIAMS

They are not gullible enough for this nonsense.

MERRILL

Forget the Ouija board. Let your example suffice. You showed America how little it takes to write a poem—now and then a memorable poem. Next we'll hear that your followers find thoughts in your things.

WILLIAMS

Aha! Prejudice!

JACKSON

Look who's talking!

TOKLAS

Boys, he has been led out & may just end up in Africa.

JACKSON

What did he look like? How was he dressed?

TOKLAS

Shabbily.

MERRILL

It's too bad. You know, he answered to my sense that these talks have been awfully one-sided. But if that's all he could come up with . . .

WALLACE STEVENS

[*Entering.*] May I? A man I could not bear in life. Such a foul breath.

JACKSON

I still don't understand. What's he doing in heaven?

STEVENS

He caught, as JM said, the imagination of 1000s.

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Wallace Stevens

JACKSON

Then why is he so angry?

STEVENS

He presides over the Family Club & is miserably bored.

MERRILL

I hope we don't bore you. Tell us about the Plato Club. What is the decor?

STEVENS

Garlands of genitalia in porphyry & rose quartz.

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MERRILL

Entre nous, I'd hoped for something different from you. At this rate we can forget the interview.

STEVENS

Think of this assignment as I did when *Life* magazine insisted on photographing me in my living room. I cunningly wore a robe over shirt & tie, coat & vest, & when the cameras were set up I was asked to stand near a wall of books. I did, but as the shutter clicked I opened my robe to reveal a considerable erection.

MERRILL

Did you now?

STEVENS

Dear James, for all of us here the joining of two hands on a cup leaves us quite aroused. Do you really want a dull literary interview? All right. I disagree with Monsieur Genet. For me writing had nothing to do with sex & everything to do with livelihood.

MERRILL

I wouldn't have thought you wrote for money.

STEVENS

Oh but I did. Teaching (at Illinois Univ) & much cheap commercial work such as advertising. My start in the insurance world came when at 46 I submitted a jingle for radio: "A dollar a day will the doctor bill pay."

MERRILL

(This is perfectly awful!) Why did you never go abroad? Your work is so cosmopolitan.

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STEVENS

I knew from friends' tales that many tiresome things happen on trips. Trains missed, street beggars, famous sites which, on personal encounter, lose magic.

MERRILL

I want to say that your work has inspired me tremendously ever since I began to write my first "grown-up" poems. Even your life seemed marvelous—that cover life as an insurance man. It proved that one didn't have to be Bohemian, that the supreme fiction didn't need cafés and brothels or gardens in Spain to flourish in.

STEVENS

The story of that runaway San Francisco streetcar was sadly distorted.

JACKSON

Which story?

STEVENS

A cable car plunged brakeless down a hill & its occupants were thrown out on collision. Walking at the foot of the hill I came upon a young man on his back. "O may I help you," I cried. He put a finger to his lips & hissed "Go away, I have a great view up that dame's dress." Not: "Go away, I'm waiting for the insurance man." So you see, life is more interesting than fiction.

MERRILL

But surely life and fiction—experience and imagination—interact, nourish each other? Poetic truth . . . ?

STEVENS

All wishful thinking. Philosophy is an excellent teaching tool, as it forces students to concentrate on abstractions. Whereas daily life forces them to study their toes. My understanding of our proposed talk today was that you wanted to see me study my toes. If I have been obtuse it was not unintentional. Until tomorrow.

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TOKLAS

He walked away whistling.

MERRILL

"Bye, bye, Blackbird"?

TOKLAS

No, "Yankee Doodle." He sang randy in place of dandy.

MERRILL

Alice, I can't begin to say how wrong his every word sounded.

TOKLAS

Until tomorrow. (What joy in this timeless place tomorrow sounds like!) Bye-bye.

July 10

TOKLAS

We are back, and Dr. Williams too.

JACKSON

I hope you've brainwashed him. What's up, Doc?

WILLIAMS

My outburst was new to me. I presume my semi-rejection here had been festering.

MERRILL

I hated our being nasty to each other. I care for so much of your work. "Burning the Christmas Greens," the perfect little watercolors, the colloquial concision—

WILLIAMS

Please understand. We have our own form of therapy here. I have spent the interim profiting by it.

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MERRILL

Don't tell us that the heavenly Academy, like the earthly one nowadays, requires political correctness from its faculty.

WILLIAMS

No. Personal problems, which burst out as mine did last time, can be quieted by therapists who work as just that.

MERRILL

Work towards what? Some secular version of "in His/Her will is our peace"? To the greater interest of . . . harmony?

WILLIAMS

If such a place as heaven is to endure, many earthly divisions must be reconciled. Not conformity but politeness. My much maligned Family Club was not intended to enforce opinion. Colette too said something soothing: "We are interested in pure political & financial pressures. Human problems of a psychological nature (as apparently mine were) do not concern us." The world, as she & her followers see it, dances now to personal greed & passion.

JACKSON

That's her communism talking.

WILLIAMS

True. She further clarifies the greed as that of capitalist leaders.

MERRILL

I've tried always to think of poetry—of all art—as the only clean use for power. Have I been naive?

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WILLIAMS

You too have written poems using political themes to make your point.

MERRILL

It's still a less harmful occupation than making bombs.

WILLIAMS

Of course, but don't we all agree that the word is endlessly more powerful than mere bombs?

MERRILL

Endlessly? I'm not sure. We were talking the other day about the copywriter. Things have accelerated since your time. Your finest effects of language took decades to be overtaken by the pack. I don't know, I've a sense of breathlessly dodging the hounds of hype, shifting my strategies, putting "English" on my billiard shots . . . Otherwise the Mondrian ends up as a place mat, Stravinsky as movie music, Eliot's phrasing sells gin or lights up Broadway. Some of the words Mallarmé purified have stayed pure. Some of the surfaces in Stevens have thus far afforded no toehold for the rampant exploiter. But why, in this country, must having readers and being popular be two such different things?

WILLIAMS

I am now of a split mind.

STEVENS

My commercial past still clings to me. In my ear still is the purr of (as Mlle. Colette calls them) capitalist pigs.

MERRILL

It's you who called money a kind of poetry. Yet your *Collected Poems* glosses over that political, engagé side of your temperament. Leaving out "Owl's Clover" for in-

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stance—all that dark, depression-haunted, "revolutionary" writing—distorts your image. It's as if a white house in Hartford and a "daughter with curls" tempted you to phase out the world's immediate past.

STEVENS

Put expertly. Yet it does seem to me that books are masks of their readers.

MERRILL

You left out poems a reader would tend to skip?

JACKSON

Like news broadcasts leaving out details that incriminate the President. Isn't poetry meant to flourish in some higher, purer air?

STEVENS

That too, I now dare to say, is an ancient Greek idea that applies less & less to the art. Poetry is simply a way to use words in patterns which do not necessarily emerge as pure. So what remains? Family business is supplanted by social business, and we "Coletters" of the latter group see words as power tools, tools of our cause, no less intensely, if not more than, the Family Club members.

MERRILL

May I ask what all that sex talk was about? Were you somehow testing us?

STEVENS

Tactic & parody. The former nude dancer creates followers by using the most powerful adult impulses.

JACKSON

So you're essentially very conservative.

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STEVENS

I thought, dear Hand, I was & am essentially a poet

MERRILL

—whose life "went without saying"? Or at least wasn't frontally presented in your work.

STEVENS

And so I come up for attack. In the robe incident I was mimicking the Coletters.

JACKSON

I thought you were pro-Colette.

STEVENS

Not totally, & therefore she is not totally included.

MERRILL

In the Plato Club? That was your decision, not hers?

STEVENS

She sees it as my male chauvinism. I see it as a natural (partial) resistance to politicking the word.

MERRILL

Like Dr. Williams, too. (Has he left?)

STEVENS

(Yes.) Now there is an excellent poet who uses the word much as Colette does, but for reverse reasons. To warm himself in a glow unsymbolic & domestic. To photograph the grimmest social realities. And to make money.

MERRILL

You were kidding about that, too, weren't you? I looked it up. You never taught anywhere.

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STEVENS

Never. But I do not deny an underlying drive to have my words teach.

MERRILL

They taught me. Their mixture of brilliant colors and abstractions—but you were never a painter either, were you?

STEVENS

I was & an abstract one. Those works now locked in the Yale library were considered "blustery."

MERRILL

You didn't want them seen?

STEVENS

Dear James, you too doodle. It is a means to lull words into our traps. Do you realize that the bored or eager faces you draw are often likenesses of your audience at readings? I painted my reactions to them instead. I used red a lot.

MERRILL

You had a sense of an ideal reader. That dedication [of *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*] to Henry Church: "The vivid transparence that you bring is peace . . . " Even, at the end, that "Fat girl . . . Bent over work, anxious, content, alone . . . "?

STEVENS

Holly. So eager & dear, so much the amateur. Let's talk about talent. Can you recall your first call to the word? I was 5, on a hayride in the woods & needed to urinate but was too shy to jump off the wagon, so I stealthily took out my peewee & kept with one hand

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pointing at birds & saying my first poetic lines: "Look, look, he flings himself into the air, oh to do that! Look, look, he is Robin Hood at bat!" One small girl said nastily "Look look, he is peeing," but I triumphed as a chorus, little eyes on the bird, cried "He is not!" I then knew the power of the word. At 15 my first attempt (after reading Poe and Emerson) was printed in the school newspaper, a poem called "My Teacher's Face." My math teacher's face, in reality ugly, bitter & cruel, which I cunningly turned into "sober, severe & loving." And miracle! Mr. Pranzer became those things. I knew the power of the printed word.

MERRILL

I guess that answers my question about life and fiction.

JACKSON

Genet wanted us to slightly despise the printed word.

STEVENS

It is where I take my leave of Genet. Had he been my math teacher it occurs to me that I would have described him as "strong, intelligent & serious."

MERRILL

And he would have become those things?

STEVENS

He emerged from your session weeping. He confessed he had dodged all mention of letters for fear that his were inferior.

MERRILL

It's partly my fault. If only I'd known his work as well as I know yours. I pictured him being led in by Uni like that naked Picasso youth advancing with his white horse.

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PABLO PICASSO

[*Darting in.*] Yes! He aroused early pity in me & whenever I could I included his enchanting face in my work. Slowly he became the youth I saw. One day, a knock at my studio door. There he was, a white-collared schoolboy with books under his arm. "Maître?" "Yes, Jean?" "May your model enter?" I said "What wages do you ask?" He replied "A kiss on the lips." I complied, we became drinking friends & my entrance into Colette's club was assured.

MERRILL

Did you ever paint Colette?

PICASSO

One charcoal study only. When it was what I called finished she seized the charcoal & filled in her face & body to become a négresse. I was furious, but her delighted laugh set me off & we ended making passionate love. [*Off he goes.*]

JACKSON

I thought we'd get back into the sack sooner or later.

TOKLAS

Dear boys, do I detect an undertone of dismay at how seemingly frivolous these talks have become? What you will slowly realize is that it all masks true response.

MERRILL

The end is in sight. Elizabeth Bowen, right?

TOKLAS

Yes. She timidly waits.

MERRILL

We'll be fresher tomorrow.

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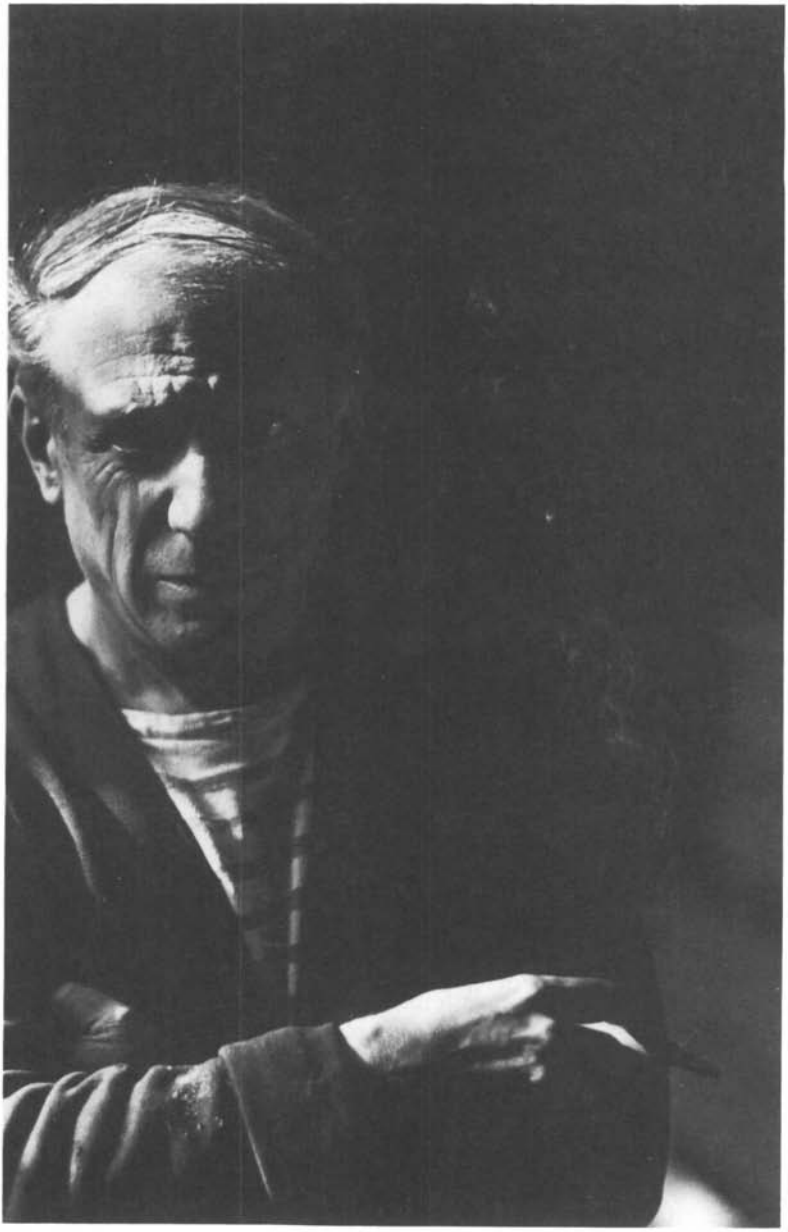

Pablo Picasso

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TOKLAS

And she too. For she (I am whispering) said "Do you think I must give my sexual history?"

MERRILL

Please put her mind at rest.

July 11

TOKLAS

Here she is, a chic & handsome matron.

ELIZABETH BOWEN

Ah, so good to communicate with you.

MERRILL

Welcome back to this table. It seems only yesterday . . .

BOWEN

And Eleanor? Are she and her mother not near?

MERRILL

Eleanor is still two blocks away. Grace is in a nursing home. She turned one hundred last January.

BOWEN

Brava! I & my staff greatly admire Eleanor's book [Green Thoughts *by Eleanor Perenyi*]. We use it as a text.

MERRILL

We'll tell her. But fill us in. What have you been doing in the next world, aside from Committee work?

BOWEN

Mother Nature put me in charge of decorative architectural foliage: hedges, climbing vines, trees of

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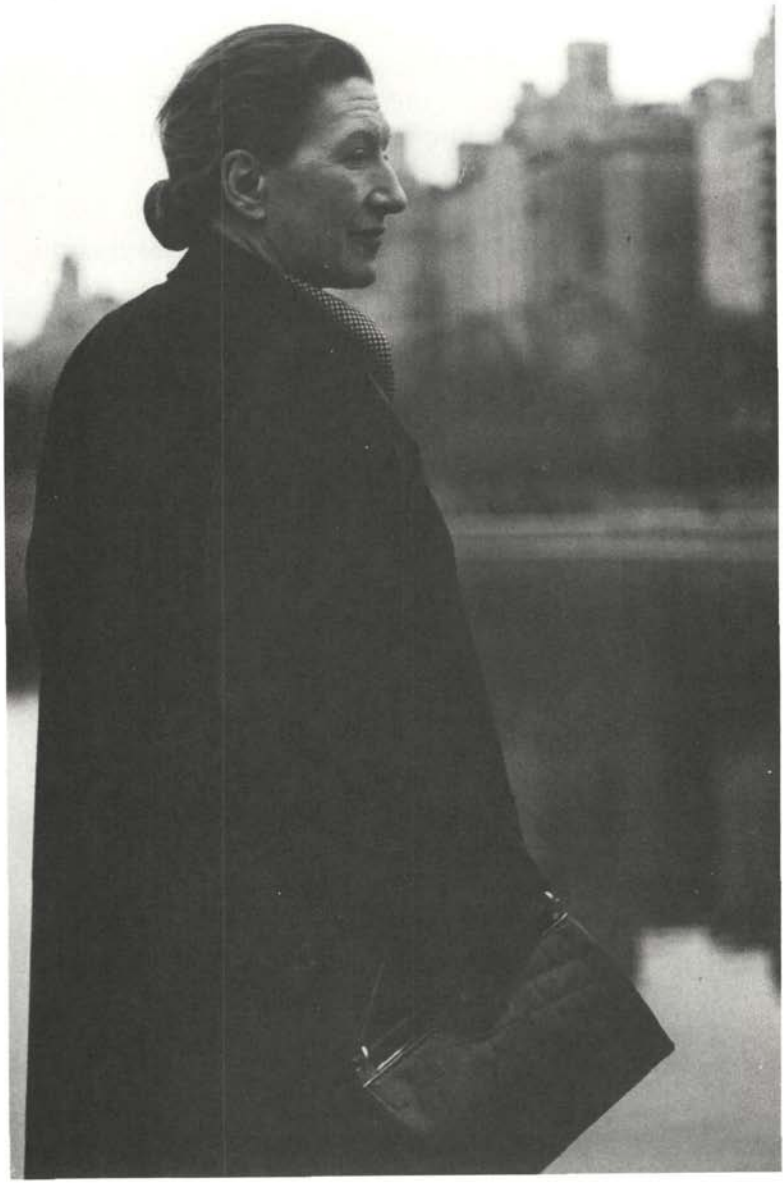

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Elizabeth Bowen

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special trim quality & poetic small fences of flowering vegetables. Finished pieces of work one can stand back & admire, as opposed to the dreary close-ups of prose.

MERRILL

Natural inspiration for the poet. They imply a human observer, am I right? Humanity may survive after all?

BOWEN

Indeed. Much as we deplore the frightful destruction of world forests, we install lawn trees wide spread which will & do bring oxygen where needed. Not unlike the transition from cosmic Homer to cosmetic Pope. At first I looked back at my work ashamed at its trivial nature, but Nature all along was saying to me "Now do you understand how decoration can be useful?"

JACKSON

What kind of book would you write now?

BOWEN

One on environment. The hero would be rain, the heroine greenery, the children

JACKSON

[*Coughing, putting out his cigarette.*] Excuse me. Go on.

BOWEN

The children, clean lungs. How we hang on your visits. Many a time I stood on tiptoe at the Hedge [*Dividing the rank and file of the dead from the charmed circle at the Ouija board.*] wishing I had shears to clip a seeing hole. I feel pleased that Ms. Alice seems to approve of me.

MERRILL

Did you ever meet in life?

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BOWEN

Once in England at a publisher's party. Madly bored I went to the toilets so I could sit & sulk. There was Ms. Alice standing in front of a mirror with a lipstick poised. When she saw me she sighed "O my dear, do you think this would help?" I took out a lip salve, colorless & asked her to purse her lips & applied it. Suddenly an enchanting glistening appeared. She kissed me & danced out. And she remembered it here!

MERRILL

A "revision" of Colette and the charcoal?

BOWEN

I often considered lesbianism after botching engagements & marriage but could not find the urge.

JACKSON

Remember that charming man who came with her? What was his name?

BOWEN

One of my better choices.

MERRILL

She and Eleanor and Grace came back bedraggled from the beach, with barely time to dress for dinner, and there he was pacing the sidewalk: "I say, how about a bit of a totter?" And off they went like young lovers to the bird sanctuary.

BOWEN

And were interrupted by a rude policeman.

MERRILL

You never wrote for money. You had an income.

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BOWEN

And social acceptability. Once in India at the lawn party of a rich Brit I looked over a hedge (as is my wont) & saw an Indian woman, wretchedly thin, with 6 children lurking nearby. I held up my finger (meaning wait) & went to the buffet returning with both hands filled. She with a bow accepted my goodies & passed them around. I smiled & waved. 15 minutes later my host came up to me quite imperious & said "Please follow me." There at the Hedge were nearly 200 people. He said "You see what you've done?" I said "No, you have done this. Why not help me gather what is left of your pretentious food & together we will hand it out?" He in a rage said "That can be your work." So I & some others stripped the refreshment table bare. A lovely story but a sad ending: After the party, strewn about the street, were scarcely nibbled pieces of food which the Indians (thanks to its high beef content) had found shameful.

JACKSON

So charity . . .

BOWEN

Must be considered not from the standpoint of the giver but the true need. I thought to include this scene in a smallish novel but my editor said "Please, no, don't. You see, words too are gifts."

MERRILL

Not always power tools . . . Alice arranged the protocol to give you—we assume—the last word in our ongoing symposium.

BOWEN

I am (sorry to say it) more thrilled at meeting you two again than being quoted in a literary review. May I recall my awakening here? My death was relatively peaceful. I

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slept, or seemed to & awoke with a great light shining through my eyelids, then, adjusting to it, saw all of my most admired colleagues chatting away before being seated at what I then discovered was the unveiling of your Sandover poem.

MERRILL

Heavens . . .

JACKSON

She died . . . when? 1978? Yes, that would have been right.

BOWEN

I kept extremely still on a back sofa, listened & fell madly in love with it as I would have with a handsome intelligent male. I can't say I convulsed sexually but my eyes were tear filled even as I stifled giggles at certain passages. And then the deafening applause & the critical "postmortems" which I admit I found often pompous. And then I found my voice & sang . . .

JACKSON

That song you taught us in Stonington! "Three corpses—"

MERRILL & JACKSON

"—lay out on the shining sand!"

BOWEN

Yes! The assembly turned & stared, and only Genet & Ms. Alice laughed. O yes & Maupassant. I felt at last I had found my own.

MERRILL

That's when you joined the Plato Club?

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BOWEN

Yes. Mother N. studied me & said "Even though your fingers have obviously never dug, *prepare!*" I do wish Eleanor could know how much more fulfilling this work is for me than writing. Dear Howard Moss! Through my pleading he also is involved in natural work (sowing seeds to produce pro-environmental poetic lines) & occasionally, back bent over a wheelbarrow (red, like nice Dr. Williams's), says as he struggles past: "Thanks a lot!"

MERRILL

We'll meet you again tomorrow?

BOWEN

Along with Mr. Henry James. He too is (shh) a bit pompous, but why not? It will be our last day.

JACKSON

Maybe he'll bring Edith Wharton.

MERRILL

I hope not! No reflection on her—but there has to be a limit, we don't have all summer, and your arm aches and my back hurts. Let's not be greedy.

UNICE

Sirs, until tomorrow? I feel the onset of flowery phrases.

July 12

TOKLAS

Dear boys, today Mr. James will appear. He is now readying himself. Such throat clearing!

MERRILL

How will he be dressed?

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TOKLAS

Suit, vest & foulard. Now. Mr. James, our Scribe, and Hand.

MERRILL

Cher maître, what a joy for us.

HENRY JAMES

And for me. I have long been told you read my work & glow with pride.

MERRILL

I too had a math teacher who saw some of my stories in the school magazine and said it was time I read *The Ambassadors.* I read it three times before I was twenty.

JAMES

Since then, is it not true, you have been identified as a "Jamesian"? I feel rather as if I were a private school. I am open to any questions & have been warned they could be personal.

MERRILL

You heard the allegations, the insinuations. Would you care to comment?

JAMES

I raise my head & say: True! & pourquoi pas!

MERRILL

Leon Edel won't be pleased.

JAMES

Biographers fall into two camps: ruthless & truthless.

JACKSON

Did your close friends know?

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Henry James

JAMES

Many did & many a sweet girl was brought to me. Need I say that any release is godly? As the sex drive produces the race, it is to be found in all, even the most abstemious creatures & need never in any form cause shame. True, there are excesses: the marquis who started

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tiresome fashions, more physically exhausting than satisfying, but extant.

JACKSON

Extant?

JAMES

Not extinct. They survive. I was for the most part traditional. At times, when my classical side took over, a charming lad lay in my arms, but I strongly felt (& feel) each experience triggered an idea which I could then put to use. Sex in your time is overclassified. Some feel menace in this, I see stupidity. Stigmata long gone have been re-released in fear of disease. It seems to me that all release carries problems & pleasures. For me it was largely mathematical. I never could determine the proper monetary compensation.

MERRILL

You loved to dictate, didn't you? I can imagine how thrilled your secretary—Miss Bosanquet?—was.

JAMES

Alas you cannot. What good sport, chasing its priestess round the Remington, she forever clucking "No, no, not that!" And I would turn, bend over & say "Do you prefer this?"

JACKSON

Here we are, back at his derrière.

JAMES

It was often compared to a muscular stallion's rump. I say! A whinny from your enchanting quadruped.

MERRILL

Your critics make it sound as if you went into society as a substitute for sex.

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JAMES

And sex nowadays is a substitute for society & society no longer exists. In its place are the poor proliferating circumstances of modern life, no case quite like the next. Each claiming the novelist's attention while driving him mad for its lack of a stable milieu.

MERRILL

Like your phrase about the various religious sects in the South—"the screaming of a million mice."

JAMES

Today's subjects partake of both mouse & trap. Society in our times was exceedingly tiresome. I decided to adapt it to my purposes, conceiving of it as villainous, as it often was.

MERRILL

Those people in your books. We know they are terrible by touches like Aunt Maud saying, "I'd be crying now if I weren't writing letters." That kind of brushwork is unthinkable today. *Everything* must be exposed.

JAMES

I tried a slyer way of exposing, by making my heroes very often victims who in fact were conspirators. And strangely, they were eulogized.

MERRILL

Maybe society secretly dreamed of being undermined.

JACKSON

So you see it as a good thing to tell all?

JAMES

Lost are the trailing skirts of ambiguity, the conversational veils & analytical whalebone, as plot moves slyly toward the unclothed truth. My critics called it long-winded; my disciples understood it as provocative.

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MERRILL

Who do you see as your disciples?

JAMES

Mr. Stevens. In fact I would call him my heir, one of them, you, Scribe, being another.

MERRILL

Heirs with no increase to the population—just the ticket.

JAMES

I wish I could have left more material wealth. To you & Wallace & Mr. Hollander & all those I see as following me.

MERRILL

So we wouldn't need to write for money? But we don't!

JAMES

No, so you could hire sexy young types to unwind you. Here & in the Plato Club are old rebels. I for one find they are chiefly deploring their having missed many a satisfying fling. The Family Club is given more than I expected to sex & gossip.

MERRILL

Do you belong to it, too?

JAMES

I was made an honorary member. I don't "attend," but often eavesdrop, covering my mouth to stifle guffaws.

MERRILL

For instance?

JAMES

Edith (who has used up all my sal volatile recovering from yesterday's "rejection slip") lately stood up to pro-

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pose forcing a ban on writers who had ever referred to any area below the waist. This met with gasps & much soul-searching until somebody said "Mme. President, you once referred to a maiden's foot on a carriage step." "Feet excepted!" snapped EW. "But Mme. President, if I am not mistaken a professor in an English class is known to have excused himself & fled to the faculty lounge where he was caught (excuse the term) mastu—" "Stop!"

MERRILL

He'd probably been reading that recently published (and very explicit) scene of father-daughter incest in—

JAMES

No, no. His undoing was this one simple sentence: "She raised her small slippered foot to the carriage step." We had reached such a nadir that only hand & facial gestures were countenanced in our polite prose.

JACKSON

So you were a rebel, too, in your day.

JAMES

Not enough for the Plato-ites.

JACKSON

But now the revolution has been accomplished. Anything can appear in print, and does. What becomes of rebellion? Where does it go?

JAMES

Nowhere. End of revolution & beginning of an echo-era of new boundlessness and (to my mind) boring writing. Hope now lies only in word choice. Soon the new rebels will emerge & lo! a return to explicit style.

MERRILL

How do you differ from your colleagues on this panel?

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JAMES

Genet, being (as he sees it) in the avant-avant-garde, does not accept my dismissal of him as romantic. Colette is/was a childish one, her attention wobbling as often as her ample charms. (Excuse me: breasts!) Miss Stein is a born leader, less interested in the cause than her own position.

MERRILL

Go on about style.

JAMES

It seems to me preemptively vital & elusive. At present (where before plot, pace & conclusion reigned supreme) isolated words & shocks & vague endings are de rigueur. Yet I know always how a work will end & close the book with dry, not avid lips. Style alone & its application to plot, makes me lick them. My dryness is viewed as old-fashioned by the Plato Club. "What," I asked at the last meeting I attended "would you order in a Forsyth restaurant?" (You know, standard English fare, the Welldone Joint, the Trifle). The only amusing answer, from Miss Bowen: "A fingerbowl." My aim was also to create a tale, usually sad, about people enmeshed by the mores of their time.

MERRILL

But what meshes.

JAMES

Language, dear James.

JACKSON

Is this really the last day?

JAMES

Yes & I am saddened & proud to have had the last word. But all the words, you must understand, created a furor here. It was the first time various creative

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voices spoke out. (Alas, as you have found, often chaotically.)

MERRILL

But you are beyond chaos, beyond everything—

JAMES

For those sweet words I bend forward & kiss you. Now we part. I cannot explain the utter peace I (we) feel at using language again. [*Goes.*]

TOKLAS

He left, the great Henry James, with tears streaming down. Many drew back astonished. Some claim to have seen a riderless horse.

MERRILL

Thank you, dear Alice, for playing hostess throughout these wonderful hours.

JACKSON

Here, let's kiss the cup. [*They do.*]

TOKLAS

Ah. We have a new tradition.

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All Saints' Day

Jean Rouaud

On All Saints' Day, 1940, Grandfather went to the cemetery with his daughter Marthe, whose firstborn son lies under a bed of white gravel, a tiny Flying Dutchman sailing into the uncharted mists of the beyond, marked with an alabaster cross bearing at its center two sparrow's wings surmounted by a cherub's head. Under the November sky, as they make their way arm in arm down a side path bordered by Lilliputian graves, Grandfather points out a man showing a certain resemblance to Léon Blum, bent grief-stricken over a granite tombstone. A tall young man in glasses is trying to tear him away from the magnetic attraction of the flat stone. Whom, Grandfather asks his daughter, can the man be mourning? And Marthe, who knows everyone in Random, tells him about Aline, proprietress of the pottery shop next to the church, who died last summer: the softness of her voice, the tragedy of her stillborn children, her imposing stature and gold jaw. The grief-

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stricken man is her husband, the charming young man, the tallest among the mourners, is their son, Joseph, born after they had given up hoping for a child, and the frowning little white-haired lady, who hurries to join them, her head sunk between her shoulders, is the most extraordinary schoolteacher in the Lower Loire department.

A year later, again at All Saints', the young man is alone beside the granite tomb. Léon Blum's double didn't lose any time, thinks Grandfather, amazed at the man's haste to join his wife. Years later, Grandfather would try to fathom the secret. He had collected the evidence in a shoe box: letters, photos, maps of the front, and the diary of Pierre's trip to Commercy, that long confession of a husband to the woman he had never left except during the war years, as though the real purpose of his journey had been to get far enough away from her to resume the tender correspondence of the terrible years, to confess to her what can only be confessed without confusion in writing, to recapture the fresh emotion that comes of absence, to pile up distance so as to rush back to her with new impetus. Secluded in his attic, Grandfather digs up fossil traces of that attachment. Time and again he turns over the photo of Pierre at the front, in puttees and sky blue uniform; his jacket stiff with dirt, he holds his rifle by the barrel with the stock to the ground; the lenses of his glasses are almost opaque, his helmet on a slight slant that gives him an almost dandified look but may have been produced by a push from a buddy. Behind him, hanging from a peg driven into the trench wall, a canteen and a grenade bag and, in a little chapel-like recess he has rigged up, a small Blessed Virgin—one suspects the hand of his sister Marie. In preparation for having his picture taken, he has deposited his pipe on an improvised bench. From its bowl rises a thin fillet of smoke, a signal unlikely to tell the enemy trench very much. Actu-

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ally, they too are smoking, writing to their families, cursing the general staff, whose ruthless orders will soon fling them into more misery and mud. The trench wall is barely higher than he is. If he doesn't stick his nose out, he has nothing to fear from snipers. He measures five foot seven and, according to his service record, which has also found its way into the shoe box, has russet eyes. Russet? Seen through eyes of that color, Grandfather reflects, all wives must have that lovely, copper complexion that he himself was looking for on the naked bodies of the women on the Ile du Levant.

Pierre smiles from the pit of horror. That is the best news he can give. The addressee of that happiness is identified on the back of the photo: "To her whom I love so dearly." Grandfather turns the picture over and over, as though hoping to discover the mysterious bridge between front and back, between the tragic scene and the words of tenderness, as though the compound of love and death attested by the proximity of the dates on the granite tombstone were contained in the thickness of the card.

At the moment he sees the tall young man in mourning bent over the grave of his parents, the curve of his back coinciding with the curve of the cypress trees bent under the brisk November wind. He seems to be hesitating whether to lie down between them in the still-warm place of the miraculous child he was, as though already preparing to answer "present" at the next roll-call. His tall silhouette freezes in uncertainty between the crosses. The strength that has carried him thus far seems to have deserted him. Not yet twenty, an orphan, virtually penniless, war all around him—who would venture to choose for him? Little by little, the mourners leave the cemetery. Alone with the call of his entombed loved ones, insensible to the awkwardly affectionate tugs at his shoulders and to murmurs of encouragement, most of which, in view of the vanity of words,

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amount to no more than the repetition of his name. Aunt Marie comes up behind him, takes hold of his coat, pulls, persists, and finally prevails. All right, he'll keep trying. Accompanied by that stubborn strength, he makes his way up the central path—if only he were dead!

—translated from the French
by Ralph Manheim

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Tomaž Šalamun

The Hunter

Somehow I know, I know these things,
such as when I will have a shepherd's
bad luck, forever the same horrible creed
of a hunter, and my heart starts to bleed.

High in the air the billowing shouts
mean nothing at all, yet,
if I don't manage, fake that I am,
to imbue myself with my own dark powers.

In the dark blue brightness
my appetite expands into the sweet
ozone, ecstasy is a precise gait,
I am where I am, and in the room.

Then the victim collapses,
and I replace suns.
I eat and shiver, my soul
can never have enough from a

jar made like this. My spit
begins to run.
Just ordinary
spit, not blood, because the

sweetness of those white explosions,
those airborne miracles hurts.
The same passion in a flower, in an avalanche
of this image, as among the divine.

—translated from the Slovene
by Michael Biggins

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Two Poems by Peter Redgrove

Tree

All the chemical deeds
Of a tall beech in the rain;

It is a perfumer's busy factory,
And the perfumer herself, dressed in rain,

A banquet which is a garment,
Green tablecloth glittering with silver service,

An analytical banquet,
Each drop balanced, weighed, considered, delivered,

Immense detail contrived by the total of leaves
Like the glittering works of a watch,

The immense total the reason
For the quality of the product,

The deluge from above pauses
For inspections of its anatomy

Laid out in detail in the tree,
The soul glittering for a while in a green body,

Soul stretched right down into the cellarage,
The root laboratory where the first extractions are performed

With the care also responsible for the quality of light
And the tree's active silhouette

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And for the complex music of its tower
Its tone like thin silver chains and a thousand violins,

The silver hiss which is small rapid vortices spun off
Like hares boxing on to the great banks of

Silence created by air rushing over the cliffs.

Eve's Apple

I

The sunbather in the sunshine, her body
Slowly browning, as though carved out of the white flesh
Of many apples; and she sips strong cider
In the sun, and through her peel sweats alcohol.

II

Peeling an apple with a silver knife
In one continuous strip, he looks
As wise or wiser than anyone who peers
Round the stinking bowl of some Sherlock pipe.

III

It was apple-wine that disclosed fabulous deer
Their horns wet with light trotting through the trees
Wet with light that wet the Seer through
And through, called 'maiden cider'
And ripe enough for boys, bought by the schoolboy
From Farmer Gregory and taken on his Sunday walk

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With or without an Oblivon but on an empty stomach
and
Went down so well it was a hot, erect and single eye
Wet with its juices from the maiden apples.

IV

Therefore there are certain times to pause
And stop time and taste his spittle that has
The flavor of inside-face which has become
Like apple-juice, apple-spit, and if
He has an erection too, mulled warm cider.

V

Every one of the linked organs of the body
Brims with its own apple-spirit, like heavy jugs
Of cider, just as the crushed ghosts of apple-trees
Poured from jug to jar fill the farmhouse kitchen and
Gnarled fruiting trees bend over our table; this is
My Eden-haunt, and the woman pours for us.

VI

A moth sips at a cider-splash. There is a snake
Inside the apple whose spit and froth radically
transform
Virgin apple-juice into its maggoty saliva,
And curdle its apple, looping drunk
On its own prostaglandins and endorphins, draping
The shiny apple-tabernacle with its cobwebs
Where serpents earn their wings and flutter back
Like seeding ancestors to sup from apple-splashes.

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VII

The apple-stars have gently dropped to earth
And settled in the trees, stars you can taste
Which shine on tongues in the night-time of the
mouth;
As he and she make love there is
A fresh apple-smell on their breath
Which grows an orchard in their house through which
they walk
As one and freely pluck and eat the starry juices.

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Five Poems by Eugenio Montale

Sorapis, Forty Years Ago

I've never been very fond of mountains
and I detest the Alps. I've never seen the Andes
or the Cordilleras. But I found the Sierra
de Guadarrama ravishing, with its gentle
ascent and fallow deer and stags on the peaks
as pictured in the tourist brochures.
Only the electric air of the Engadine
won us over, dear Mosca, but it wasn't
so richly rewarding that we said, *hic manebimus.*
Among lakes, our only great find was Sorapis.
It had the solitude of woodchucks, more often
heard than seen, and the air of the Celestials;
but the road that took you there! At first
I traveled it alone to see if your eyes
could penetrate the clouds zigzagging
through lofty slabs of ice. And such a
long journey! The only solace in the first stretch,
through dense conifers, was the alarmed screeching
of the jays. Then I took you by the hand
and led you to the summit and an abandoned hut.
It was our lake, its waters a few spans wide,
and we were two lives too young to be old,
and too old to feel young.
Then we discovered what aging is.
Age has nothing to do with time, it's something
that makes us say we're here, a miracle
that happens only once. By comparison,
youth is the vilest of illusions.

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To Pio Rajna

I don't like funerals. The few I've attended,
anonymous in the line of mourners
but never for long, I've completely
forgotten. One, maybe the first,
that next-to-inexplicable funeral, persists.

A small man unannounced by braying
elephants or brandishing of damascene swords
and not altogether unlike Wagner's Mime
came down to the cellar where I was spending
hour after hour, confounding me with stuttered
compliments
and, to my dismay, told me his name. A bolt of
lightning
struck me and for years the flare smoldered
beneath the ashes, but the man died shortly after.
No artisan from Valtellina,
no peasant peddling rare bottles of Inferno,
he was the sort who builds his nest between the lines
of the most archaic sagas, like some wingless bird
known only to paleo-ornithologists
or a specimen of what Homo sapiens used to be
before sapience became a sin.
Some people live in the time assigned them
unaware that time, like a typewriter
ribbon, can be reversed.
Those who dig up the past don't need to be told
that hardly the millionth of a second
divides future from past. That's why
man is so small—
so he can slip between the chinks.

Was he a small man or memory struggling
back to life? I don't know, all I recall
is that I didn't miss that funeral. In 1930,
on a day like any other.

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Transvestisms

So it's no fable
that the devil appears
like the great Fregoli
in drag.
But the true *travesti* type
which was one of the linchpins
of the old melodrama
isn't in the least exhausted.
It has no need at all
of makeup, wigs, or other disguises.
A look in the mirror is enough
to convince us we're someone else.
Someone else, different always
but always recognizable
by him who made a cliché
of our features.
So the art of *dédoublement*
never succeeds:
like ladies of the night
we wanted to camouflage ourselves
the better to conceal our wounds
but it's futile. One look at us
is all it takes.

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Reading Cavafy

While Nero naps peacefully
in his exuberant beauty
his little household gods, hearing
the Furies howl, abandon his hearth
in wild turmoil. How and when
will he wake? So spoke the Poet.
I, emperor of nothing, not even of myself,
lacking the warmth of fragrant firewood
and lapped by the chill of a kerosene
stove, I too hear the clickety-clack
of clogs and feet. A microscopic slither.
I don't wake up, I've been awake for hours
and I expect no horrors beyond those
to which I'm by now accustomed.
I don't even order a household slave
to slit my veins. Nothing troubles me.
I hear the skittering of a mouse. Traps
are things I've never owned.

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Aspasia

Late at night
men entered her ground-floor
room via the window.
I'd nicknamed her Aspasia, which she liked.
Then she left us. She was a waitress, a hairdresser,
and other things. I ran into her only rarely.
When I did I yelled out Aspasia!
and she smiled without stopping.
We were the same age, she'll have died years ago.
When I enter hell, almost out of habit
I'll shout Aspasia! at the first ghost who smiles.
She'll keep on walking of course. We'll never know
who she was and who she wasn't—
that butterfly who had next to nothing but a name
I chose to give her.

—translated from the Italian
by William Arrowsmith

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Marie

Edward Jones

Every now and again, as if on a whim, the Federal government people would write to Marie Delaveaux Wilson in one of those white, stampless envelopes and tell her to come in to their place so they could take another look at her. They, the Social Security people, wrote to her in a foreign language that she had learned to translate over the years, and for all of the years she had been receiving the letters the same man had been signing them. Once, because she had something important to tell him, Marie called the number the man always put at the top of the letters, but a woman answered Mr. Smith's telephone and told Marie he was in an all-day meeting. Another time she called and a man said Mr. Smith was on vacation. And finally one day a woman answered and told Marie that Mr. Smith was deceased. The woman told her to wait and she would get someone new to talk to her about her case, but Marie thought it bad luck to have telephoned a dead man and she hung up.

Now, years after the woman had told her Mr. Smith was no more, the letters were still being signed by John

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Smith. Come into our office at Twenty-first and M Streets, Northwest, the letters said in that foreign language. Come in so we can see if you are still blind in one eye. Come in so we can see if you are still old and getting older. Come in so we can see if you still deserve to get Supplemental Security Income payments.

She always obeyed the letters, even if the order now came from a dead man, for she knew people who had been temporarily cut off from SSI for not showing up or even for being late. And once cut off, you had to move heaven and earth to get back on.

So on a not unpleasant day in March, she rose in the dark in the morning, even before the day had any sort of character, to give herself plenty of time to bathe, eat, lay out money for the bus, dress, listen to the spirituals on the radio. She was eighty-six years old and had learned that life was all chaos and painful uncertainty and that the only way to get through it was to expect chaos even in the most innocent of moments. Offer a crust of bread to a sick bird and you often draw back a bloody finger.

John Smith's letter had told her to come in at eleven o'clock, his favorite time, and by nine that morning she had had her bath and had eaten. Dressed by 9:30. The walk from Claridge Towers at Twelfth and M down to the bus stop at Fourteenth and K took her about ten minutes, more or less. There was a bus at about 10:30, her schedule told her, but she preferred the one that came a half hour earlier, lest there be trouble with the 10:30 bus. After she dressed, she sat at her dining room table and went over yet again what papers and all else she needed to take. Given the nature of life—particularly the questions asked by the Social Security people—she always took more than they might ask for: her birth certificate, her husband's death certificate, doctors' letters.

One of the last things she put in her pocketbook was a knife that she had, about seven inches long, which she had serrated on both edges with the use of a small saw

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borrowed from a neighbor. The knife, she was convinced now, had saved her life about two weeks before. Before then she had often been careless about when she took the knife out with her, and she had never taken it out in daylight, but now she never left her apartment without it, even when going down the hall to the trash drop.

She had gone out to buy a simple box of oatmeal, no more, no less. It was about seven in the evening, the streets with enough commuters driving up Thirteenth Street to make her feel safe. Several yards before she reached the store, the young man came from behind her and tried to rip off her coat pocket where he thought she kept her money, for she carried no purse or pocketbook after five o'clock. The money was in the other pocket with the knife, and his hand was caught in the empty pocket long enough for her to reach around with the knife and cut his hand as it came out of her pocket.

He screamed and called her an old bitch. He took a few steps up Thirteenth Street and stood in front of Emerson's Market, examining the hand and shaking off blood. Except for the cars passing up and down Thirteenth Street, they were alone, and she began to pray.

"You cut me," he said, as if he had only been minding his own business when she cut him. "Just look what you done to my hand," he said and looked around as if for some witness to her crime. There was not a great amount of blood, but there was enough for her to see it dripping to the pavement. He seemed to be about twenty, no more than twenty-five, dressed the way they were all dressed nowadays, as if a blind man had matched up all their colors. It occurred to her to say that she had seven grandchildren about his age, that telling him this would make him leave her alone. But the more filth he spoke, the more she wanted him only to come toward her again.

"You done crippled me, you old bitch."

"I sure did," she said, without malice, without triumph, but simply the way she would have told him the time of day had he asked and had she known. She

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gripped the knife tighter, and as she did, she turned her body ever so slightly so that her good eye lined up with him. Her heart was making an awful racket, wanting to be away from him, wanting to be safe at home. I will not be moved, some organ in the neighborhood of the heart told the heart. "And I got plenty more where that come from."

The last words seemed to bring him down some and, still shaking the blood from his hand, he took a step or two back, which disappointed her. I will not be moved, that other organ kept telling the heart. "You just crazy, thas all," he said. "Just a crazy old hag." Then he turned and lumbered up toward Logan Circle, and several times he looked back over his shoulder as if afraid she might be following. A man came out of Emerson's, then a woman with two little boys. She wanted to grab each of them by the arm and tell them she had come close to losing her life. "I saved myself with this here thing," she would have said. She forgot about the oatmeal and took her raging heart back to the apartment. She told herself that she should, but she never washed the fellow's blood off the knife, and over the next few days it dried and then it began to flake off.

Toward ten o'clock that morning Wilamena Mason knocked and let herself in with a key Marie had given her.

"I see you all ready," Wilamena said.

"With the help of the Lord," Marie said. "Want a spot a coffee?"

"No thanks," Wilamena said, and dropped into a chair at the table. "Been drinkin' so much coffee lately, I'm gonna turn into coffee. Was up all night with Calhoun."

"How he doin'?"

Wilamena told her Calhoun was better that morning, his first good morning in over a week. Calhoun Lambeth was Wilamena's boyfriend, a seventy-five-year-old man she had taken up with six or so months before, not long

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after he moved in. He was the best-dressed old man Marie had ever known, but he had always appeared to be sickly, even while strutting about with his gold-tipped cane. And seeing that she could count his days on the fingers of her hands, Marie had avoided getting to know him. She could not understand why Wilamena, who could have had any man in Claridge Towers or any other senior citizen building for that matter, would take such a man into her bed. "True love," Wilamena had explained. "Avoid heartache," Marie had said, trying to be kind.

They left the apartment. Marie sought help from no one, lest she come to depend on a person too much. But since the encounter with the young man, Wilamena had insisted on escorting her. Marie, to avoid arguments, allowed Wilamena to walk with her from time to time to the bus stop, but no farther.

Nothing fit Marie's theory about life like the weather in Washington. Two days before, the temperature had been in the forties, and yesterday it had dropped to the low twenties, then warmed up a bit with the afternoon, bringing on snow flurries. Today the weather people on the radio had said it would warm enough to wear just a sweater, but Marie was wearing her coat. And tomorrow, the weather people said, it would be in the thirties, with maybe an inch or so of snow.

Appointments near twelve o'clock were always risky, because the Social Security people often took off for lunch long before noon and returned sometime after one. And except for a few employees who seemed to work through their lunch hours, the place shut down. Marie had never been interviewed by someone willing to work through the lunch hour. Today, though the appointment was for eleven, she waited until 1:30 before the woman at the front of the waiting room told her she would have to come back another day, because the woman who handled her case was not in.

"You put my name down when I came in like every-

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thing was all right," Marie said after she had been called up to the woman's desk.

"I know," the woman said, "but I thought that Mrs. Brown was in. They told me she was in. I'm sorry." The woman began writing in a logbook that rested between her telephone and a triptych of photographs. She handed Marie a slip and told her again she was sorry.

"Why you have me wait so long if she whatn't here?" She did not want to say too much, appear too upset, for the Social Security people could be unforgiving. And though she was used to waiting three and four hours, she found it especially unfair to wait when there was no one for her at all behind those panels the Social Security people used for offices. "I been here since before eleven."

"I know," the woman behind the desk said. "I know. I saw you there, ma'am, but I really didn't know Mrs. Brown wasn't here." There was a nameplate at the front of the woman's desk and it said Vernelle Wise. The name was surrounded by little hearts, the kind a child might have drawn.

Marie said nothing more and left.

The next appointment was two weeks later, 8:30, a good hour, and the day before a letter signed by John Smith arrived to remind her. She expected to be out at least by twelve. Three times before eleven o'clock Marie asked Vernelle Wise if the man, Mr. Green, who was handling her case, was in that day, and each time the woman assured her that he was. At twelve, Marie ate one of the two oranges and three of the five slices of cheese she had brought. At one, she asked again if Mr. Green was indeed in that day and politely reminded Vernelle Wise that she had been waiting since about eight that morning. Vernelle was just as polite and told her the wait would soon be over.

At 1:15, Marie began to watch the clock hands creep

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around the dial. She had not paid much attention to the people about her, but more and more it seemed that others were being waited on who had arrived long after she had gotten there. After asking about Mr. Green at one, she had taken a seat near the front and, as more time went by, she found herself forced to listen to the conversation that Vernelle was having with the other receptionist next to her.

"I told him . . . I told him . . . I said just get your things and leave," said the other receptionist, who didn't have a nameplate.

"Did he leave?" Vernelle wanted to know.

"Oh, no," the other woman said. "Not at first. But I picked up some of his stuff, that Christian Dior jacket he worships. I picked up my cigarette lighter and that jacket, just like I was gonna do something bad to it, and he started movin' then."

Vernelle began laughing. "I wish I was there to see that." She was filing her fingernails. Now and again she would look at her fingernails to inspect her work, and if it was satisfactory, she would blow on the nails and on the file. "He back?" Vernelle asked.

The other receptionist eyed her. "What you think?" and they both laughed.

Along about two o'clock Marie became hungry again, but she did not want to eat the rest of her food because she did not know how much longer she would be there. There was a soda machine in the corner, but all sodas gave her gas.

"You-know-who gonna call you again?" the other receptionist was asking Vernelle.

"I hope so," Vernelle said. "He pretty fly. Seemed decent too. It kinda put me off when he said he was a car mechanic. I kinda like kept tryin' to take a peek at his fingernails and everything the whole evenin'. See if they was dirty or what."

"Well, that mechanic stuff might be good when you

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get your car back. My cousin's boyfriend used to do that kinda work and he made good money, girl. I mean real good money."

"Hmmmm," Vernelle said. "Anyway, the kids like him, and you know how peculiar they can be."

"Tell me 'bout it. They do the job your mother and father used to do, huh? Only on another level."

"You can say that again," Vernelle said.

Marie went to her and told her how long she had been waiting.

"Listen," Vernelle said, pointing her fingernail file at Marie. "I told you you'll be waited on as soon as possible. This is a busy day. So I think you should just go back to your seat until we call your name." The other receptionist began to giggle.

Marie reached across the desk and slapped Vernelle Wise with all her might. Vernelle dropped the file, which made a cheap, tinny sound when it hit the plastic board her chair was on. But no one heard the file because she had begun to cry right away. She looked at Marie as if, in the moment of her greatest need, Marie had denied her. "Oh, oh," Vernelle Wise said through the tears. "Oh, my dear God. . . ."

The other receptionist, in her chair on casters, rolled over to Vernelle and put her arm around her. "Security!" the other receptionist hollered. "We need security here!"

The guard at the front door came quickly around the corner, one hand on his holstered gun and the other pointing accusingly at the people seated in the waiting area. Marie had sat down and was looking at the two women almost sympathetically, as if a stranger had come in, hit Vernelle Wise, and fled.

"She slapped Vernelle!" said the other receptionist.

"Who did it?" the guard said, reaching for the man sitting beside Marie. But when the other receptionist said it was the old lady in the blue coat, the guard held back for the longest time, as if to grab her would be like

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arresting his own grandmother. He stood blinking and he would have gone on blinking had Marie not stood up.

She was too flustered to wait for the bus and so took a cab home. With both chains, she locked herself in the apartment, refusing to answer the door or the telephone the rest of the day and most of the next. But she knew that if her family or friends received no answer at the door or on the telephone, they would think something had happened to her. So the next afternoon, she began answering the phone and spoke with the chain on, telling Wilamena and others that she had a toothache.

For days and days after the incident she ate very little and asked God to forgive her. She was haunted by the way Vernelle's cheek had felt, by what it was like to invade and actually touch the flesh of another person. And when she thought too hard, she imagined that she was slicing through the woman's cheek, the way she had sliced through the young man's hand. But as time went on she began to remember the man's curses and the purplish color of Vernelle's fingernails, and all remorse would momentarily take flight. Finally, one morning nearly two weeks after she slapped the woman, she woke with a phrase she had not used or heard since her children were small: You whatn't raised that way.

It was the next morning that the thin young man in the suit knocked and asked through the door chains if he could speak with her. She thought that he was a Social Security man come to tear up her card and papers and tell her that they would send her no more checks. Even when he pulled out an identification card showing that he was a Howard University student, she did not believe.

In the end, she told him she didn't want to buy anything, not magazines, not candy, not anything.

"No, no," he said. "I just want to talk to you for a bit. About your life and everything. It's for a project for my folklore course. I'm talking to everyone in the building

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who'll let me. Please . . . I won't be a bother. Just a little bit of your time."

"I don't have anything worth talkin' about," she said. "And I don't keep well these days."

"Oh, ma'am, I'm sorry. But we all got something to say. I promise I won't be a bother."

After fifteen minutes of his pleas, she opened the door to him because of his suit and his tie and his tie clip with a bird in flight, and because his long, dark brown fingers reminded her of delicate twigs. But had he turned out to be death with a gun or a knife or fingers to crush her neck, she would not have been surprised. "My name's George. George Carter. Like the president." He had the kind of voice that old people in her young days would have called womanish. "But I was born right here in D.C. Born, bred and buttered, my mother used to say."

He stayed the rest of the day and she fixed him dinner. It scared her to be able to talk so freely with him, and at first she thought that at long last, as she had always feared, senility had taken hold of her. A few hours after he left, she looked his name up in the telephone book, and when a man who sounded like him answered, she hung up immediately. And the next day she did the same thing. He came back at least twice a week for many weeks and would set his cassette recorder on her coffee table. "He's takin' down my whole life," she told Wilamena, almost the way a woman might speak in awe of a new boyfriend.

One day he played back for the first time some of what she told the recorder:

> . . . My father would be sittin' there readin' the paper. He'd say whenever they put in a new president, "Look like he got the chair for four years." And it got so that's what I saw—this poor man sittin' in that chair for four long years while the rest of the world went on about its business. I don't know if I thought he ever did anything, the president. I just

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knew that he had to sit in that chair for four years. Maybe I thought that by his sittin' in that chair and doin' nothin' else for four years he made the country what it was and that without him sittin' there the country wouldn't be what it was. Maybe thas what I got from listenin' to father readin' and to my mother askin' him questions 'bout what he was readin'. They was like that, you see. . . .

George stopped the tape and was about to put the other side in when she touched his hand.

"No more, George," she said. "I can't listen to no more. Please . . . please, no more." She had never in her whole life heard her own voice. Nothing had been so stunning in a long, long while, and for a few moments before she found herself, her world turned upside down. There, rising from a machine no bigger than her Bible, was a voice frighteningly familiar and yet unfamiliar, talking about a man whom she knew as well as her husbands and her sons, a man dead and buried sixty years. She reached across to George and he handed her the tape. She turned it over and over, as if the mystery of everything could be discerned if she turned it enough times. She began to cry, and with her other hand she lightly touched the buttons of the machine.

Between the time Marie slapped the woman in the Social Security office and the day she heard her voice for the first time, Calhoun Lambeth, Wilamena's boyfriend, had been in and out of the hospital three times. Most evenings when Calhoun's son stayed the night with him, Wilamena would come up to Marie's and spend most of the evening sitting on the couch that was catty-corner to the easy chair facing the big window. She said very little, which was unlike her, a woman with more friends than hairs on her head and who, at sixty-eight, loved a good party. The most attractive woman Marie knew would only curl her legs up under herself and sip whatever

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Marie put in her hand. She looked out at the city until she took herself to her apartment or went back down to Calhoun's place. In the beginning, after he returned from the hospital the first time, there was the desire in Marie to remind her friend that she wasn't married to Calhoun, that she should just get up and walk away, something Marie had seen her do with other men she had grown tired of.

Late one night, Wilamena called and asked her to come down to the man's apartment, for the man's son had had to work that night and she was there alone with him and she did not want to be alone with him. "Sit with me a spell," Wilamena said. Marie did not protest, even though she had not said more than ten words to the man in all the time she knew him. She threw on her bathrobe, picked up her keys and serrated knife and went down to the second floor.

He was propped up on the bed, surprisingly alert, and spoke to Marie with an unforced friendliness. She had seen this in other dying people—a kindness and gentleness came over them that was often embarrassing for those around them. Wilamena sat on the side of the bed. Calhoun asked Marie to sit in a chair beside the bed and then he took her hand and held it for the rest of the night. He talked on throughout the night, not always understandable. Wilamena, exhausted, eventually lay across the foot of the bed. Almost everything the man had to say was about a time when he was young and was married for a year or so to a woman in Nicodemus, Kansas, a town where there were only black people. Whether the woman had died or whether he had left her, Marie could not make out. She only knew that the woman and Nicodemus seemed to have marked him for life.

"You should go to Nicodemus," he said at one point, as if the town was only around the corner. "I stumbled into the place by accident. But you should go on purpose. There ain't much to see, but you should go there and spend some time there."

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Toward four o'clock that morning, he stopped talking and moments later he went home to his God. Marie continued holding the dead man's hand and she said the Lord's Prayer over and over until it no longer made sense to her. She did not wake Wilamena. Eventually the sun came through the man's venetian blinds, and she heard the croaking of the pigeons congregating on the window ledge. When she finally placed his hand on his chest, the dead man expelled a burst of air that sounded to Marie like a sigh. It occurred to her that she, a complete stranger, was the last thing he had known in the world and that now that he was no longer in the world. All she knew of him was that Nicodemus place and a lovesick woman asleep at the foot of his bed. She thought that she was hungry and thirsty, but the more she looked at the dead man and the sleeping woman, the more she realized that what she felt was a sense of loss.

Two days later, the Social Security people sent her a letter, again signed by John Smith, telling her to come to them one week hence. There was nothing in the letter about the slap, no threat to cut off her SSI payments because of what she had done. Indeed, it was the same sort of letter John Smith usually sent. She called the number at the top of the letter, and the woman who handled her case told her that Mr. White would be expecting her on the day and time stated in the letter. Still, she suspected the Social Security people were planning something for her, something at the very least that would be humiliating. And, right up until the day before the appointment, she continued calling to confirm that it was okay to come in. Often, the person she spoke to after the switchboard woman and before the woman handling her case was Vernelle. "Social Security Administration. This is Vernelle Wise. May I help you?" And each time Marie heard the receptionist identify herself she wanted to apologize. "I whatn't raised that way," she wanted to tell the woman.

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George Carter came the day she got the letter to present her with a cassette machine and copies of the tapes they had made about her life. It took quite some time for him to teach her how to use the machine, and after he was gone, she was certain it took so long because she really did not want to know how to use it. That evening, after her dinner, she steeled herself and put a tape marked "Parents/ Early Childhood" in the machine.

> . . . My mother had this idea that everything could be done in Washington, that a human bein' could take all they troubles to Washington and things would be set right. I think that was all wrapped up with her notion of the gov'ment, the Supreme Court and the president and the like. "Up there," she would say, "things can be made right." "Up there" was her only words for Washington. All them other cities had names, but Washington didn't need a name. It was just called "up there." I was real small and didn't know any better, so somehow I got to thinkin' since things were on the perfect side in Washington, that maybe God lived there. God and his people. . . . When I went back home to visit that first time and told my mother all about my livin' in Washington, she fell into such a cry, like maybe I had managed to make it to heaven without dyin'. Thas how people was back in those days. . . .

The next morning she looked for Vernelle Wise's name in the telephone book. And for several evenings she would call the number and hang up before the phone had rung three times. Finally, on a Sunday, two days before the appointment, she let it ring and what may have been a little boy answered. She could tell he was very young because he said hello in a too loud voice, as if he was not used to talking on the telephone.

"Hello," he said. "Hello, who this? Granddaddy, that you? Hello. Hello. I can see you."

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Marie heard Vernelle tell him to put down the telephone, then another child, perhaps a girl somewhat older than the boy, came on the line. "Hello. Hello. Who is this?" she said with authority. The boy began to cry, apparently because he did not want the girl to talk if he couldn't. "Don't touch it," the girl said. "Leave it alone." The boy cried louder and only stopped when Vernelle came to the telephone.

"Yes?" Vernelle said. "Yes." Then she went off the line to calm the boy who had begun to cry again. "Loretta," she said, "go get his bottle. . . . Well, look for it. What you got eyes for?"

There seemed to be a second boy, because Vernelle told him to help Loretta look for the bottle. "He always losin' things," Marie heard the second boy say. "You should tie everything to his arms." "Don't tell me what to do," Vernelle said. "Just look for that damn bottle."

"I don't lose noffin'. I don't," the first boy said. "You got snot in your nose."

"Don't say that," Vernelle said before she came back on the line. "I'm sorry," she said to Marie. "Who is this? . . . Don't you dare touch it if you know what's good for you!" she said. "I wanna talk to grandaddy," the first boy said. "Loretta, get me that bottle!"

Marie hung up. She washed her dinner dishes. She called Wilamena because she had not seen her all day, and Wilamena told her that she would be up later. The cassette tapes were on the coffee table beside the machine, and she began picking them up, one by one. She read the labels: Husband No. 1, Working, Husband No. 2, Children, Race Relations, Early D.C. Experiences, Husband No. 3. She had not played another tape since the one about her mother's idea of what Washington was like, but she could still hear the voice, her voice. Without reading its label, she put a tape in the machine.

> . . . I never planned to live in Washington, had no idea I would ever even step one foot in this city.

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This white family my mother worked for, they had a son married and gone to live in Baltimore. He wanted a maid, somebody to take care of his children. So he wrote to his mother and she asked my mother and my mother asked me about goin' to live in Baltimore. Well, I was young. I guess I wanted to see the world, and Baltimore was as good a place to start as anywhere. This man sent me a train ticket and I went off to Baltimore. Hadn't ever been kissed, hadn't ever been anything, but here I was goin' farther from home than my mother and father put together. . . . Well, sir, the train stopped in Washington, and I thought I heard the conductor say we would be stoppin' a bit there, so I got off. I knew I probably wouldn't see no more than that Union Station, but I wanted to be able to say I'd done that, that I step foot in the capital of the United States. I walked down to the end of the platform and looked around, then I peeked into the station. Then I went in. And when I got back, the train and my suitcase was gone. Everything I had in the world on the way to Baltimore. . . .

. . . I couldn't calm myself down enough to listen to when the redcap said another train would be leavin' for Baltimore, I was just that upset. I had a buncha addresses of people we knew all the way from home up to Boston, and I used one precious nickel to call a woman I hadn't seen in years, cause I didn't have the white people in Baltimore number. This woman come and got me, took me to her place. I 'member like it was yesterday that we got on this streetcar marked 13TH AND D NE. The more I rode, the more brighter things got. You ain't lived till you been on a streetcar. The further we went on that streetcar—dead down in the middle of the street—the more I knowed I could never go live in Baltimore. I knowed I could never live in a place

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that didn't have that streetcar and them clackety clack tracks. . . .

She wrapped the tapes in two plastic bags and put them in the dresser drawer that contained all that was valuable to her: birth and death certificates, silver dollars, life insurance policies, pictures of her husbands and the children they had given each other and the grandchildren those children had given her and the great-grands whose names she had trouble remembering. She set the tapes in a back corner of the drawer, away from the things she needed to get her hands on regularly. She knew that however long she lived, she would not ever again listen to them, for in the end, despite all that was on the tapes, she could not stand the sound of her own voice.

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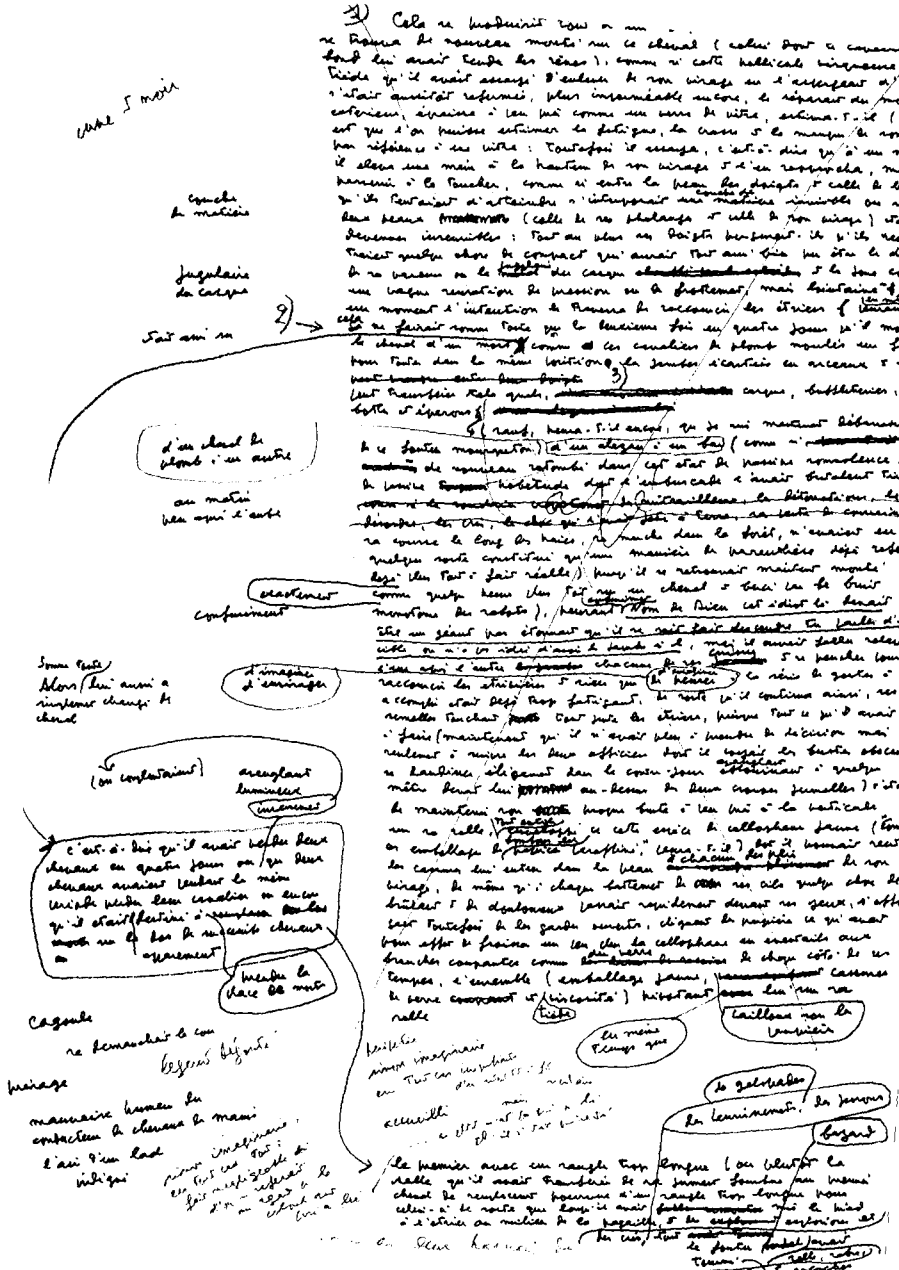

A manuscript page from The Acacia *by Claude Simon.*

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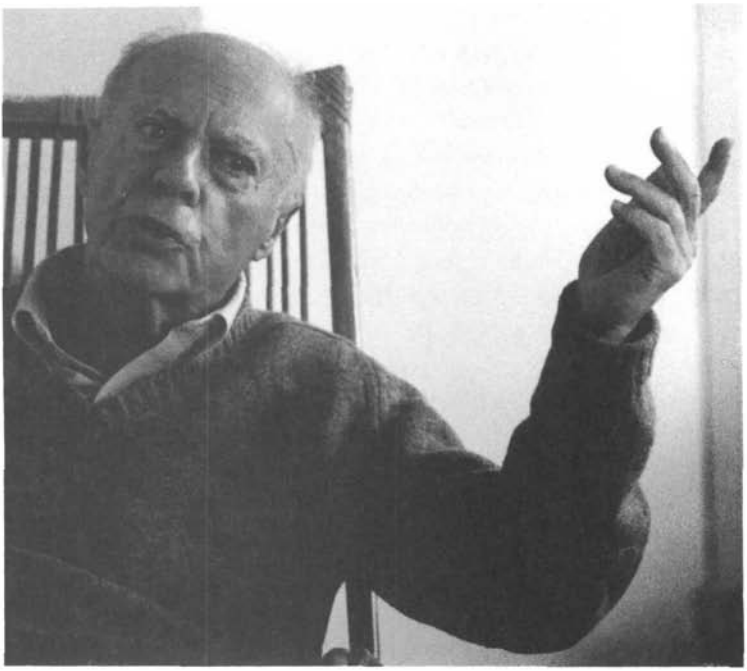

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Claude Simon

The Art of Fiction CXXVIII

Claude Simon has long denied that he writes his novels in the style of the French nouveau roman—in fact he considers nouveau roman *to be a misleading term under which critics have falsely grouped the work of several French authors, including Nathalie Sarraute, Alain Robbe-Grillet and Marguerite Duras, whose literary styles, themes and interests are, according to Simon, quite diverse. But it was nevertheless as a "new novelist" that Simon was known best until he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1985. Literary critics and academicians have attributed to him everything from an obsession with the*

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philosophy of the absurd to a penchant for nihilism. The symbolism in his work has been extensively analyzed, excessively so in the eyes of Simon—he rejects almost all interpretation of his work, portraying himself as a straightforward writer who draws on the material which life provides him. What emerges, though, is challenging, baroque. Sentences continue for pages; passages contain no punctuation. Always, he is lyrical. More often than not, Simon depicts a reality of death and dissolution, with war a common presence. He rejects the conventional novels of the nineteenth century and embraces Dostoyevsky, Conrad, Joyce, Proust and Faulkner, whose highly charged, evocative use of language he draws upon. Objects and scenes echo each other, are repeated, turned over and examined in minute detail from many angles; time flows backward, forward and back again with changing points of view.

Claude Simon was born in 1913 in Tananarive, Madagascar and raised in Perpignan, France. His father died in battle when Simon was less than a year old. Orphaned at age eleven, he was sent to boarding school in Paris, but spent summers with relatives. As a young man, he briefly studied painting and traveled to Spain during the civil war there, where he sided with the Republicans. He once said that he turned to writing because he imagined it would be easier than either painting or revolution. Simon began his literary career on the eve of World War II with the novel Le tricheur, *but was conscripted into the military before he could complete the manuscript. He narrowly survived his tour of duty with an anachronistically outfitted squadron of the French cavalry, which faced German panzers on horseback, armed with sabers and rifles.* Le tricheur *was finally published in 1945. Simon had received an inheritance and, at the close of the war, was able to devote himself entirely to writing.*

His works have been widely translated, ten of them into English, including the novels The Grass *(1960),* The Flanders Road *(1961),* The Palace *(1963),* Histoire *(1968),* Conducting Bodies *(1974),* Triptych *(1976),* Georgics *(1989),* The Invitation *(1991) and* The Acacia *(1991).*

Simon now lives in Paris, where he has spent most of his adult

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life. He summers in the south of France, near the town of Perpignan where he grew up. This interview was conducted primarily by mail, during the spring and summer of 1990. A brief final session was held in the bright and spacious living room of Simon's modestly furnished Paris apartment, an airy fifth-floor walk-up in the fifth arrondissement. The white walls were hung with artwork; the environment bore little resemblance to the dark world Simon depicts in his fiction.

INTERVIEWER

Would you describe yours as a happy childhood?

CLAUDE SIMON

My father was killed in the war, in August of 1914, and my mother died when I was eleven years old, after which I was sent, as a boarding student, to a religious institution with very severe discipline. Although I was orphaned at a young age, I regard my childhood as having been rather happy—thanks to the affection that my uncles and aunts and cousins showered on me.

INTERVIEWER

What was the name of the boarding school?

SIMON

Stanislas College, which is actually a grammar school in Paris. My mother was very pious and had wanted me to receive a religious education.

INTERVIEWER

Did this institution have any effect on you emotionally or intellectually?

SIMON

I became an atheist. That, it seems to me, is evident in my books.

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INTERVIEWER

How did your formal education shape you?

SIMON

I received what one would call a *cultural base*: Latin, mathematics, sciences, history, geography, literature, foreign language. A huge defect in secondary instruction in France is that one practically never speaks of art: music, painting, sculpture, architecture. For instance, I was made to learn hundreds of verses by Corneille, but one never spoke of Nicolas Poussin, who is much more important.

INTERVIEWER

You fought alongside the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War, but became disillusioned and left the cause. Why?

SIMON

I did not fight. I arrived in Barcelona in September 1936 "trying to be a spectator more than an actor in the comedies that play in the world." That's one of the principles set forth by Descartes. When he wrote that, the word *comédie* designated every theatrical representation, comic as well as tragic. For Descartes, who lived austerely observing the weakness of human passions, this word had a slightly pejorative and ironic sense. Balzac also used the word in the title of a group of books, *La comédie humaine*, that is actually given up to tragic episodes. The most woeful ingredients of the Spanish Civil War were its selfish motives, the hidden ambitions it served, the emphasis on hollow words used by both sides; it seemed to be a comedy—terribly bloody—but a comedy all the same. Still, given the degree to which the war was murderous and involved a great deal of treachery, I could not myself qualify it as a *comédie*. What drew me there? Naturally, my sympathy for the Republicans;

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but also my curiosity to observe a civil war, see what was happening.

INTERVIEWER

Your life has been touched a great deal by luck: You were one of the few French cavalrymen to survive the Battle of the Meuse in 1940, which took place on the field where your father died. Taken prisoner by the Germans, you escaped after six months and then worked in the Resistance. After this period you retired to your family's country estate, where an inheritance has enabled you to devote yourself exclusively to your writing.

SIMON

All my life I have been favored by incredible luck. It would take too long to enumerate all of the occasions, though one example stands out among all the others: In May 1940, my squadron was ambushed by German tanks. Under fire, the foolish order was given to "fight on foot," followed almost immediately by the order, "on horseback, at a gallop!" Just as I put my foot in the stirrup, the saddle slipped. Just my luck, I thought, in the middle of the battle! But that's what saved me: On foot, I found myself in a dead zone, a level crossing where I couldn't be hit. The majority of those who had remounted were killed. I could tell you about ten or twelve occasions when I had similarly good luck. Often, as in the case of the ambush, what one thinks is bad luck turns out to be the opposite. Paul Valéry wrote: "When everything is added up, our life is nothing but a series of hazards to which we give responses more or less appropriate."

INTERVIEWER

How did you escape the German prison camp?

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SIMON

I managed to get onto a train of prisoners the Germans were bringing to Frontstalag for the winter. The camp was badly guarded. Just after I arrived, I escaped in broad daylight by slipping between two German sentinels into the forest. From there, hiding along the way, I reached the line of demarcation.

INTERVIEWER

What work did you do for the Resistance?

SIMON

I was not in the heart of it. The Center for Military Intelligence of the National Liberation Movement, directed by Colonel Vauban, was installed in my apartment, at 148 boulevard du Montparnasse. This was from April 1944 until the liberation. My role was passive: that of the host. After the Second World War, I lived in Paris; during the summer I lived in Perpignan, in the eastern Pyrenees. I owned a small number of vineyards, which were managed in Salses, fifteen kilometers north of Perpignan. I have sold this land, but still have a house in the village where I spend my summers.

INTERVIEWER

When did you first start writing?

SIMON

I'm not really sure. During my military service, I think.

INTERVIEWER

What made you write your first novel?

SIMON

The ambition to write a novel.

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INTERVIEWER

You've said that "our perception of the world is deformed, incomplete . . . our memory is selective. Writing transforms . . . " Is this transformation therapeutic in any way? Do you see writing as a form of therapy?

SIMON

No. I write only for pleasure, for the sake of producing something, and, naturally, in the hope of being read. Apparently this hope is not completely vain, since I now have, in many countries, thousands of readers.

INTERVIEWER

Did the writings of Sartre and Camus have a great influence on your own work?

SIMON

I consider the writings of Camus and Sartre to be absolutely worthless. Sartre's work is, above all else, dishonest and malevolent. If I have admitted to any influences, they have been those of Dostoyevsky, Chekhov, Joyce, Proust and Faulkner. All my writing comes from personal experience.

INTERVIEWER

The hero of your first novel, *Le tricheur*, has been described as being very close to Meursault in *The Stranger*.

SIMON

Le tricheur was nearly finished in the spring of 1941, well before Camus's *The Stranger*. I met my first editor, Edmond Bomsel, during the war. He was Jewish. His publishing house, The Sagittarius, had been confiscated by the Germans. He was a refugee in the southern zone and asked me to wait until the end of the war to publish

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Le tricheur. I agreed. There is, therefore, absolutely no link with or influence on the part of Camus.

INTERVIEWER

You mention the influence of Faulkner, Joyce and Proust on your writing. Does it bother you that some critics view your work as imitative?

SIMON

Those who write more or less stupid or malevolent criticism leave me largely indifferent. If I had given them my attention, I would not have done the work that won me the Nobel Prize.

INTERVIEWER

Some have said that it was after you wrote *Le sacre du printemps* in the fifties that you became a "new novelist."

SIMON

Since the majority of professional critics do not read the books of which they speak, mountains of nonsense have been spoken and written about the nouveau roman. The name refers to a group of several French writers who find the conventional and academic forms of the novel insupportable, just as Proust and Joyce did long before them. Apart from this common refusal, each of us has worked through his own voice; the voices are very different, but this does not prevent us from having mutual esteem and a feeling of solidarity with one another.

INTERVIEWER

What distinguishes your voice from those of the other new novelists?

SIMON

Beginning with *The Grass*, my novels are more and more based on my life and require very little fiction—in the end, really none at all.

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INTERVIEWER

If you had to attach a label to your type of writing, what would it be, if not *nouveau roman?*

SIMON

Labels are always dangerous. You oblige me to repeat myself: If there is anything new in the novel, after the abandonment of the fable, it began in this century with Joyce and Proust.

INTERVIEWER

You once said you were bored by nineteenth-century realism. Did you choose your style of writing in reaction to this, to write a novel you felt was truly representative of reality?

SIMON

There is no such thing as a "real" representation of "reality." Except, perhaps, in algebraic formulae. All the literary schools pretend that they are more realistic than their predecessors. Who knows what reality is? The impressionists stopped pretending to represent the visible world and presented the public with the "impressions" they received from it. If it's true that we only perceive the exterior world in fragments, the canvases of the cubists' "synthetic" period are realistic. More realistic still are the "assemblages" of Schwitters, Rauschenberg or Nevelson.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you choose the style of writing that you did?

SIMON

I did not choose it. I write as I can.

I've had the luck to have a genius of a publisher: Jerome Lindon. He owns one of the smaller publishing houses in Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, with only nine employees. I came to them through Alain Robbe-Grillet,

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whom I met on vacation. He asked to read the manuscript of *The Wind*, which I was then finishing. He liked it and encouraged me to publish with Les Editions de Minuit, which I agreed to do because they had published writers for whom I have a great deal of esteem, such as Beckett, Butor, Pinget and Robbe-Grillet himself. In recent years Les Editions de Minuit has had two Nobel prize-winners: Samuel Beckett and myself.

INTERVIEWER

Do you write quickly?

SIMON

No. Very slowly.

INTERVIEWER

Do you take notes, keep a journal?

SIMON

I take very few notes. I have never kept a journal. My memory is visual above all else.

INTERVIEWER

What do you want your readers to learn from your books?

SIMON

They'll learn nothing. I have no messages to deliver. I hope only that they will find pleasure. The nature of this pleasure is difficult to define. One part is what Roland Barthes has called *recognition*—the recognition of sentiments or feelings one has experienced oneself. The other is the discovery of what one had *not* known about oneself. Johann Sebastian Bach defined this sort of pleasure as "the expected unexpected."

INTERVIEWER

How do you work?

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SIMON

I write with a ballpoint pen (Stabilo-Stylist 188), after which I use a typewriter. I write with a great deal of difficulty. My phrases construct themselves little by little, after many erasures, which prohibits the use of a typewriter.

INTERVIEWER

Do you follow a regular writing schedule, setting aside a certain amount of time to work every day?

SIMON

Each afternoon I start at around three-thirty and work until about seven-thirty or eight.

INTERVIEWER

You once said, "It's the moment when I begin to battle with words that something comes to me."

SIMON

Exactly. Each time I have a vague project in mind which gradually modifies itself for the better as I work.

INTERVIEWER

Is it true that you color-code your manuscripts with colored pencils in order to keep track of each narrative strand?

SIMON

The composition of my books gives me great problems. While working on *The Flanders Road* I gave a color to each of the themes and characters. Doing this, I could visualize the whole, modify it, improve the placement of the fade-ins, the alterations of scenes, the rehearsals, the curtain calls. One day the composer Pierre Boulez told me that my biggest problem must be that of periodicity, which in music is the frequency of repetitions of one theme or refrain in a composition, often subject to varia-

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tions or changes of tone. Boulez was exactly right. He did not find too many repetitions in my books but understood that one of my problems was arranging them well.

INTERVIEWER

If you have trouble remembering the order of these strands, how can you expect the reader to do so?

SIMON

If he's not capable of following the course of the book and it bores him, why shouldn't he throw it out? It's that simple. That's what I always did when a book did not give me pleasure. We live in a democracy. We can choose to read what pleases us.

INTERVIEWER

In your early novels, such as *The Grass* and *The Flanders Road*, you wrote in long and complex sentences. More recently, your sentences have become simpler, and you have abandoned the paragraph altogether. What caused you to change your style?

SIMON

My project is different every time. To repeat the same things is of no interest.

INTERVIEWER

Do you decide the point of view in your novels in advance, or does this emerge as you write?

SIMON

When I start a novel I see it as a very vague project that gets modified for the better in the course of my work, not because my characters dictate their conduct, as certain imbecile novelists pretend, but because the language unceasingly presents new perspectives. Many years ago I said in an interview: "The novel makes itself, I make it, and it makes me."

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INTERVIEWER

Critics have said you have two types of heros—one who fights against order and one who accepts it—and that the conflict between these two types is at the center of your books.

SIMON

One must pose this type of question to philosophers. I am a novelist. One last time: What interests me is not the *why* of things but the *how*.

INTERVIEWER

So you don't consider yourself a philosopher?

SIMON

Certainly not. I did not even take philosophy in high school. I studied mathematics. In general, I distrust philosophy. Plato recommended chasing poets from the city; the "great" Heidegger was a Nazi; Lukács was a Communist and J.P. Sartre wrote: "Any anti-Communist is a dog."

INTERVIEWER

Do you think it is possible or idiotic for human beings to find happiness in their lives?

SIMON

No, it's not idiotic. It's human. But was it Flaubert who said, "The idea of happiness has caused many tears to flow"?

INTERVIEWER

When are you happiest in your own life?

SIMON

In numerous ways . . . in loving or sexual relationships, reading a good book—Proust always throws me into a state of rapture—contemplating a picture, enjoying arch-

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itecture, listening to music . . . it would take too long to list them all. . . . Maybe my happiest days were during that autumn when I was escaping from the prison camp . . . living outside the law.

INTERVIEWER

For the characters in your novels sex is always emotionally empty or destructive. Yet your portrayal of the sex act is often very erotic.

SIMON

The great weakness of the majority of erotic novels is that they feature conventional characters, spineless puppets who have no depth—the inevitable marquesses or marquises, English lords, multimillionaires, valets and gamekeepers—to whom these sexual acts just happen, and for this reason, seem disembodied. . . . To describe erotic scenes inserted among other, non-erotic scenes (as it happens in life) interests me; I have attempted it several times. Sadly, so many taboos are attached to sex that it is very difficult to talk about it. It is necessary to find a tone, a distance. Things such as affectation, derision or lyricism, that may flaw writing about other subjects, become completely intolerable in erotic writing. That which is private is rendered into something frankly ridiculous, as in the famous *Story of O*. . . . And recall the passage in Dostoyevsky's *The Devils* where, after Stavrogin recounts the highly erotic and metaphysical episode of the rape and the hoped-for suicide of the little girl, Tikhon asks him, simply, if he does not believe in the ridiculous.

INTERVIEWER

Your novels repeatedly deal with the inevitability of death, with the dissolution of all things, with the futility of life. If life is really so empty and meaningless, why write about it?

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SIMON

André Malraux, for whom I do not otherwise have much appreciation, has said: "Man is the only animal who knows that he is destined to die." Life is not "futile" for all of that. Really, on the contrary, it is to be valued *because* of that. Why write? To write. To make something. The best response to this question was given by Samuel Beckett: "That's all I'm good for." If life is sometimes difficult, full of misfortune, suffering—I know something of this: I fought in war, was a prisoner, constrained to forced labor, scarcely nourished, much later gravely ill—I also know life carries many joys, satisfactions.

INTERVIEWER

Well then, what is the role of the writer in society?

SIMON

To change the world. Each time a writer or an artist "tells" the world in an ever so slightly new fashion, it is changed. "Nature imitates art," Oscar Wilde said. And this is not a witticism. Apart from touching it, man only knows the world through representations given of it . . . through painting, literature, algebraic formulae, and so forth.

INTERVIEWER

Do you concern yourself with national or international politics?

SIMON

I take an interest in politics, but without passion. Today politics seem more than ever to be controlled by economic constraints; political leaders are reduced to the role of administrators. It is not for ideological reasons that Gorbachev was looking to make a political structure different from his predecessors', but because he faced an economic disaster in the Soviet Union. When events

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cross the threshold of what is tolerable (as, for example, the repression and the war led by France in Algiers during the fifties) I show my opposition.

INTERVIEWER

You were twice a runner-up for the Nobel Prize for Literature. There was a public outcry when you failed to receive it in 1983. How did you feel when you got it in 1985?

SIMON

Extremely pleased. To be honest, others have had reactions of displeasure they cannot hide. In France, in literary circles, it was as though someone had made them swallow a hedgehog, whole, with all its needles. For example, a colleague, a "friend," told *The New York Times* that he made me hold back every other chapter from one of my novels, thanks to which it had become more readable. But still, the Nobel. A great stroke of luck, let me tell you! It's lucky to have something like this happen when you are seventy-two years old, and when your head is solidly screwed on. Honors and money are suddenly heaped on you! An avalanche of invitations from all over the world! That can be stressful, can turn heads. After receiving a Parisian literary prize for much less, some writers have remained impotent for the rest of their lives. Lars Gillensten, the secretary of the Swedish Academy, told me at Stockholm: "Now—write, write! . . . Afterward, most laureates write nothing else." And so, "afterward" I wrote a big novel, *The Acacia*, published last fall, which the critics, from the Communists to the extreme right, including the Catholics, have called the best of my books.

INTERVIEWER

You have often referred to yourself as an amateur writer. After producing fourteen novels, do you still call yourself an amateur?

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SIMON

Writing novels is not a profession. One is not paid by the month or year by a boss. A professional is someone who has acquired a certain number of skills by which he can be assured of a calculable return. The butcher has learned how to cut meat, the doctor to diagnose illnesses, the mason to build a wall—all according to various rules. In art, there are no rules. To the contrary, often it's a question of breaking them. With no guarantees. I am, therefore, always an amateur on whom, miraculously, money is bestowed from time to time.

INTERVIEWER

What is your definition of a professional writer, then?

SIMON

A journalist, a critic, charged with regular assignments in a publication for a predetermined salary. Also, the authors of best-sellers who write in order to please the public at large and to receive constant remuneration.

INTERVIEWER

Several passages in *The Flanders Road* describe words as being useless. Do you believe this?

SIMON

It's necessary to put that in context. The character in *Flanders Road* who says those words is a prisoner in a camp, exhausted, famished, covered with lice. Under these circumstances, words do not appear to have great value. But this is nothing new. "The hungry stomach has no ears" is an old French proverb. Fortunately, today I don't live in a prison camp but in a relatively civilized society. But that said, I continue to think the abominations that have marked this century—Auschwitz, the Gulag—have shown that human life counts for exactly nothing, and that a "humanist" discourse is no longer acceptable. From this comes my predilection for descrip-

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tion, and my distrust of qualitative adjectives, or, similarly, commentary or analysis, psychological or social; or, if I dare try to use these, I qualify them with an abundance of "maybes," "without doubts" and "as ifs."

INTERVIEWER

You have said that anyone can do what you have done, so long as they are willing to work as hard. Do you mean there is no room for innate talent in a writer—that persistence and hard work are all that are required?

SIMON

Apart from a certain level of elementary instruction, I think that in effect anyone can, by working hard, do what I do. Certainly there are tastes, predispositions . . . some for mathematics, for business, medicine or painting . . . or even laziness . . .

INTERVIEWER

Do young people ask your advice about how to become a writer?

SIMON

Not often, happily.

INTERVIEWER

If they do ask, what do you tell them?

SIMON

To go out in the street, walk two hundred meters, go home again, and then attempt to write (and describe) all that they have seen (or thought, dreamed, remembered, imagined) during this walk.

INTERVIEWER

In 1970 you published *The Blind Orion*, which has been called your literary manifesto.

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SIMON

It's not. At the request of the publisher, in a small preface I put down some of my ideas about writing. But it's very brief. Scarcely eight pages.

INTERVIEWER

What is the significance of the title?

SIMON

In Stockholm I said that the writer was the image of blind Orion groping through a forest of signs toward the light of the rising sun. It is important to note that Orion is a constellation: As soon as the sun rises in the sky, he will be obliterated. It's the subject of a painting by Nicolas Poussin.

INTERVIEWER

Symbolism seems important in your writing. In *The Grass,* for example, a T-shaped shadow grows and shrinks as it passes across the room in which Marie lies dying, representing the passage of time and the inevitability of death. How do you decide on such images?

SIMON

I am not a symbolist. I saw the light drawing a *T* that moved slowly across the floor and the furniture of a room. The *T* suggested to me the word *temps* and the march of time. It seemed like a good image.

INTERVIEWER

Trains appear often in your novels—what do they symbolize?

SIMON

Nothing but trains.

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INTERVIEWER

Boxes with illustrated lids—the cigar-box label in *La corde raide*, for example, and the cookie tin in *The Grass*. What is their significance?

SIMON

Nothing. I like to describe things. As others like to paint. Nothing else. Shakespeare wrote: Life is "A tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." That's also my way of thinking. Except that for me life is not only full of sound and fury. It also has butterflies, flowers, art . . .

INTERVIEWER

Do you read your novels once they are published?

SIMON

No.

INTERVIEWER

What are your plans for the future?

SIMON

None. I only make short-term plans. I am seventy-seven years old. I can die tomorrow. I wish only to be able to write.

—Alexandra Eyle
with translation assistance from Magali Saporito

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Sportsman's Paradise

Nancy Lemann

Orient Point, Long Island.

The guests are arriving, across the lawn. It is Friday afternoon. The men are coming in on the late train in the parlor car, and others have come on the ferryboat steaming in on the blue sea at dusk with gay lights.

My old flame, Hobby Fox, is sitting on a deck chair in the night alone. He is the nephew of Constant Fox, the heartthrob. Possibly Hobby is too gruff and crusty to be an exact heartthrob. But he is one anyway. "His eyes are so blue it just makes you want to go jump in the river," as Margaret commented.

Usually he sits obliviously on the porch reading the stock pages or the sports pages, listening to the low, masculine drone of the baseball games on the radio and smoking a cigar, with his slightly burnt-out air. He has a certain burnt-out air. Distracted by his memories, perhaps.

Friday evenings after work, the young men go to the baseball games in their suits and ties and sunglasses, having plain American fun. It touches my heart, because they

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don't have plain American fun where I come from, it is too exotic and remote for that, it is the dark side. They don't have baseball in New Orleans. It's not normal enough to have baseball.

In New York I learned quite a bit about baseball, as to many a Northerner it is his great love. But what interested me about it was not perhaps the same thing that interested them. I like how all the ball players have marital problems and personality problems and need sports psychiatrists, and especially in baseball, where you don't have to be that athletic, or it's not as strenuous in a way, the players are all dissipated wrecks with drug problems, chain-smoking. That would maybe work in New Orleans. Baseball would maybe work in New Orleans because all the players are dissipated wrecks with troubled relationships with their fathers. But they are tough guys. Except for when they retire, then they cry. The whole thing is an emotional roller coaster, at least for me, trying to keep up with their problems. That's what I like about it.

I saw a baseball player hold a press conference to announce his retirement. Big, burly guy with a mustache. Six feet tall, extremely manly, big rough tough guy. "I had a dream," he said. "Ten years ago I was a kid with two bad knees who wanted to be a baseball player." He stopped and looked down at his speech. He bit his upper lip. Time passed. He was silent. Finally you realized that he was stopping because he was trying to compose himself. Still he remained silent. You got the picture, he was struggling. But then finally he said, "And I'm just glad that dream came true"—sobbing, screaming, crying, literally falling completely to pieces. Then he just walked away from the whole podium and cried. See what I mean?

I like how they have so many emotions even though they are crusty sports figures. Actually I know one ex-baseball player who is a crusty figure without having so many emotions—Hobby Fox. At Carolina, Chapel Hill, he was drafted by the Major Leagues and spent a season

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with the Atlanta Braves. He was a pitcher. Then he decided to go to law school. It seems he had a motley career.

Currently world editor of the *New York Examiner*, he was an athlete, a man's man, an old pro, who had been around the block a million times at age thirty-six. Among the young couples he is an outsider, but then so am I. The young couples ceaselessly pursue their innocent amusements—boating, dinner parties, bridge, etc. Their innocence bemuses me. I have more in common with the misanthrope.

He wears sweatpants emblazoned with the legend "Duck Hunting Club of New Orleans," an old-fashioned sleeveless ribbed undershirt, and tennis shoes. He has a sort of crusty gruff demeanor, which for some reason has inspired the children to idolize him. Although he is a misanthrope he often finds himself with the responsibility of the children, who follow him around, and with whom he is quite gruff, but tender, if the truth be told.

It is his peculiar blend of tenderness and disinterest, I think, that has inspired their confidence.

Hobby always has the radio tuned in to the baseball games in a low masculine drone, redolent of Yankeefied spring and summer afternoons. Mr. Underwood too has a love of baseball and also keeps the games on in the office at night if he works late. Due to these influences I find that I myself am developing a growing obsession with baseball and the need to chronicle the progress of the New York team that I follow. Hobby taught me a lot about it. He doesn't follow his old team in Atlanta. He follows the New York team while here. His father loved the St. Louis Cardinals, because in his day they were the team of the South. They were an all-black team, all extremely cultivated, and they had the most beloved manager in baseball. The manager of the New York team is completely listless. The personality of the New York team mystifies me. They have a certain elegance, I think, because they are so stoic. If they get a home run or

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something good they try not to smile or act excited. If someone gets a home run, he comes out of the dugout and gives a curtain call, tipping his hat to the crowd, seeming rather quaint or courtly—and they only do this in New York, I'm told—but maintaining a gruff though courtly exterior. Equally, if they lose or get slaughtered they betray no emotion other than seeming mildly dejected. It results in a certain elegance because the other teams are more volatile and make obnoxious displays at every sign of advancement.

Also the New York team is riddled with problems. If you like problems, you've come to the right place, with the New York team. Each player has a dazzling array of problems: drug problems, drug rehabilitation, alcohol detox, injuries, marital problems, personality problems, nervous breakdowns and psychological problems, also confidence problems.

Yet at the same time as they are afflicted with a ceaseless array of problems, it is the National Pastime, plain American fun, heartwarming, wholesome, one thing that draws everyone together, the very young and the very old, and has an innocence, a certain basic innocence, good for the children, a chance to go forth with the heroes, a good thing for the boys.

The other thing I like about the New York team is that they are underdogs. I love that. I would never root for the favorite. I like how they are always struggling, getting slaughtered twice in one night in doubleheaders, being exhausted by rain delays or playing extra innings until two in the morning, losing. Adversity becomes them, as adversity can be becoming if its object has character. There is a poignance to their struggle. Plus, then if they suddenly win, it is all the more affecting. The New York team always loses and is stoic, elegant, dejected. But to the stars through adversity.

Then if they suddenly win I am suffused with a sense of well-being, and if they lose I feel doleful and listless.

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I have a constant need to listen to every single game and keep up with everyone's problems. But my love for baseball is inexplicable—never before did I take the slightest interest in sports. Never was there one subject so boring to me as sports.

Now I even listen to the sports talk shows in the middle of the afternoon on the radio hosted by falling New York lunatics who remind me of Mr. Underwood, who sound off in deep Bronx and Queens accents about what burns them up. "I've had it," they passionately avow, referring to sports figures who irritate them or contracts negotiated that are too expensive. Often they slip into dreamy recollections of ball players from the thirties on the Yankees or Brooklyn Dodgers, distracted by their memories, exhibiting a marked preference for the older teams of the American League, and if someone calls them up to ask a question about upstarts in the National League they say, "I've had it." Sometimes they go berserk on the show and start insulting the callers and have complete breakdowns ending up screaming out to the caller, "Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" and then disconnect the phone line in a fury. "You're a schmuck. You're crazy. You're giving me a nervous breakdown. Shut up!" Once I heard a nut call up who was equally as much of a lunatic as the announcer. The nut launched into a rambling unconnected story about a glamor girl who kissed him at a baseball game. Then he started swearing. "Do not take the name of the Lord in vain," said the announcer solemnly to the nut. "That is where I draw the line." It's a funny place to suddenly draw the line, considering that he spends the rest of the time raving like some kind of insane maniac. Then the nut started sounding off about what burned him up in sports and the announcer lost his cool again and started screaming. "You need a brain transplant. You're driving me crazy. Shut up!" And these nuts go at it forty-eight hours a day. They spend forty-eight hours a day analyzing these subjects on the radio. Sports, baseball, contracts, they analyze it for forty-

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eight hours a day. I turn on the radio at two in the morning and there they are, talking in strange voices like they're mentally unbalanced, analyzing everything. "New York did not play Philadelphia tonight," the announcer will be saying in a ghostly strangled voice, "Tidewater played Philadelphia tonight. A minor league team played Philadelphia tonight. Schmucks!" he screams, in his New York parlance. This analysis had to do with one night when a lot of people on the New York team were injured and had to be replaced by rookies from the farm team. I know about these things now. Suddenly I'm a sports fanatic, listening to sports talk shows twenty-four hours a day.

"Cincinnati is not going to make it. Cincinnati is through. Finished. It's over for Cincinnati!" Screaming. Long silences. Tortured strangled voices. Here they were referring to the pennant race and who would be in the World Series.

In New York they had a romance with failure—uncharacteristic of the North. It began in the old days, at the Polo Grounds, with a series of eccentrics as managers and a ball club that could never win.

Everyone was in tortures over it. That's what kills me about baseball, how everyone is in tortures over it as if it were the most serious thing that could ever be. Like the nuts who call up the sports channel on the radio all day to analyze everything. In the articles in the *Tribune* the commissioner of baseball would always have all these tortured quotes about integrity and self-delusions in long tortured ponderings, when it's only about baseball. I mean, you'd think they were talking about World War Two. Like the most grave subject. The baseball commissioner agonizing over principles, integrity, abstractions as if he were Aristotle, not the baseball commissioner.

What I prefer is the team that had the romance with failure. They used to be arrogant and cocky and make

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obnoxious displays at every sign of advancement, just like everyone else, and everyone hated them for it, because they were so arrogant and cocky. Then the manager told them not to gloat or make such displays, so now they all act like laconic Southern gentlemen. I personally like them better that way. But of course it's not a New York type of attitude, and the New Yorkers hate them that way.

Mr. Underwood had a box at the baseball games with other big cheeses: the Governor, millionaire racetrack owners, retired bandleaders, etc. Actually the retired bandleader in his entourage was a poignant figure, somehow out of place, being Southern. He could care less about baseball. He was used to seedy dives on Bourbon Street. Baseball just wasn't his thing. It was written on his face, in his countenance, on everything about him. Being from Bourbon street, I can certainly understand why the Southern bandleader did not feel an affinity for baseball, as I never did before either until I realized how it has its dark side, or generally from spending five years in New York, but certainly on Bourbon Street the idea of baseball is but a remote image of a boy in the 1920s with a baseball cap in the sweet afternoon sun or sterling Northern twilight in some halcyon idea of America from which New Orleans is indescribably remote. But Mr. Underwood loved it all—retired sports figures, troubled prize fighters, washed-up Southern bandleaders—in his box of big cheeses at the game.

Hobby had a more ambivalent attitude, having played in the Major Leagues himself, and there were times when I got the feeling that he had left his heart there. Being thirty-five and out of practice I doubt he could go back. Though I hear of players who are forty-two and forty-three, such as relief pitchers. I guess he did not play long enough or make enough of an impression to come back to a career in baseball as a coach or manager. He listened

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to the games but did not often speak of his past in baseball. Also he had been a newspaperman now for too many years to think of much else. But once I saw in his room in Orient the Louisville Slugger that he used in Atlanta; it was inscribed with the team and had his name burned onto it. He kept it with him, then. Some reminder of an innocence, which baseball surely represents, though it certainly has its dark side, so it seems to me at least. Every time I ask him about one of the players, he launches into a long story about how the fellow was a drug addict, or on trial, or just got out of alcohol detox or jail. I had no idea that baseball had such a dark side, or was so riddled with problems, but of course, that's what I like about it.

He was telling me about a pitcher who thought it was his day off and took LSD. He happened to hear on the radio that his team was playing that night in Chicago—which he had forgotten. So he hopped on a plane to Chicago tripping on LSD and pitched a no-hitter.

Later he was on trial and told the judge that when you're on LSD in a ball game, it makes the ball look like a grapefruit when it's coming at you, so it's easier to hit.

Also Hobby told me that on his team in Atlanta it was one of the first years that they had a sports psychiatrist for the ball club. He went crazy at the end of the season.

The TV announcers discuss these problems during their ceaseless banter at the game even though they are so all-American it seems they wouldn't want to admit them, and were all players themselves before they became announcers. The other night New York was playing Philadelphia and the announcers were discussing the pitcher for Philadelphia before the game. One of the announcers is a kindly old man who seems at times virtually senile and can't seem to keep track of what is going on. You'd think that maybe baseball in his day had less

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problems to it, at least in terms of psychiatry. But they were talking about the pitcher and he said, "Frank is back on the mound right now but it seems last year he had some psychological problems," looking out at ten trillion viewers on TV. Then he chuckled fondly, after saying the words *psychological problems*, shaking his head in bemusement, but at the same time with concern, and then got a sort of rueful, whimsical smile, looking at the other announcer to elaborate.

"I was talking to him and he explained, 'I was giving myself a nervous breakdown.' Ha ha. He went to Harvard but he just got out of alcohol detox. He's a great pitcher, Bob. The only question is, can he keep out of the hooch."

Keep out of the hooch—I'm not sure whether that means stay out of the loony bin or stay off the sauce.

Harvard, alcohol detox, baseball and psychological problems—you have to admit that's a pretty weird mix-up.

There was a rain delay, and they called in a sort of sports weatherman. He was a cornball. The announcers are always sentimental and enthusiastic.

"What about the weather, Jim? Do you think we'll play?"

"I know we will, Bob. In about forty-five minutes, you'll see this storm clear up and they will start the ball game."

"How can you be so sure?"

"This is my life, Bob. I'm obsessed with the weather. I love it. It's my life."

Then the announcers chuckle and shake their heads fondly in bemusement.

On certain Fridays since this April, Hobby had been taking me to the baseball games—whenever he could get away from the office.

Friday night we went to a double-header. The stadium announcer keeps droning on throughout the

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game on a loudspeaker in a cheerful voice, "Alcoholic beverages . . . Anti-social behavior . . . People drinking . . . Taking drugs . . ." Admonishing potential abusers of these vices. There are a lot of Police. Sometimes horrifying brawls break out in the stands. "Here comes trouble," said a fan when a weirdo with a menacing expression came up to take his seat and the weirdo heard him and got mad. "Shut up! Who are you calling trouble, schmuck, shut up! Shut up!" As everyone knows, the attitude of the New York fans is "What have you done for me lately?" Meaning if the team is losing the fans are filled with loathing and disgust—this is why they call the radio talk shows at two in the morning to ceaselessly analyze all the problems and complain about how disgusted they are and go berserk, etc. The New York stadium is like a latent catastrophe waiting to happen. But it never really does, in baseball. An innocence is inexorably attached to the game no matter how many people go crazy or how many drug problems or etc. arise.

Hobby and I had left the office late, to go out that night to the ball park, which had been named, oddly enough, for a pitcher from Louisiana, Sportsman's Paradise. It was a glamorous night in New York. The temperature was ninety degrees. I take a perverse satisfaction in the heat because the Northerners can't stand it, they're not used to it, whereas the Southerners are. Also it was humid and the sky was a thick cobalt blue as night fell.

We left the office at 7 PM, in the midst of the usual gigantic summer traffic jam to Long Island. With everyone leaving all at once for the same place, Long Island, at exactly the same time. It does seem kind of ridiculous. That route out of New York, it's a dying-looking sort of place, but it's gutty, as they say in baseball. And that's why I find it glamorous, because it is gutty. The ball park is the most glamorous place in New York to

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me, because it is the most gutty. When I was young the East Coast was beauteous and promising; now it is gutty. There's one benefit of growing older, for I like it better gutty.

We were listening to the radio announcers call the game on the way out, as we were late due to the traffic. The radio droned on, describing as usual a demoralizing loss, but a certain rugged masculinity emanated from the sporting world, as the game droned on.

While passing that gutty landscape to Queens, Hobby was telling me about his father, one's parents' love. Though in his parents' case it was something less than love, which made him misanthropic, I think. Then we came into the ball park in a hot summer twilight. The stadium was a swirling vortex of chaos, as usual. It remained hot throughout the night.

It had been a fair day at the office for Hobby. The President of Burma quit, causing some flurries in the international section.

"Now it will be a swirling madhouse of unled people," I said. "Do you think you'll have to go there?" I asked him.

"No. But I am going to call Dolores." Dolores was his new secretary.

"How do you like Dolores?"

"She's a swirling vortex of human secretarial potential," he said, to kid me.

He was having some problems with his secretary. It was a measure of his character. He always answered his own phone, for instance, which I find that no one in a reasonably high position in New York would generally ever do. And he was a true big cheese. The reason why he always answered his own phone was because his secretary, formerly a woman of a certain age named Mary Louise, was such an antiquated person, that as she perambulated slowly from office to lunch to the fulfillment of her personal errands, her official duties often fell be-

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hind . . . and Hobby was too courtly to ask for a different secretary. Finally Mary Louise retired. Then came Dolores.

I felt that Hobby seemed to seclude himself. "You go to work, you go to Long Island, but you seclude yourself," I said to him.

"I go to work, often I have to work in Orient too. This doesn't leave much time for square dancing," he said. "But I am not totally secluded. I know you, don't I?" He looked at me sideways, askance, with those dazzling blue eyes.

It was a hot July night, and we lost very badly twice, a doubleheader. But there is something dashing and brave about the huge cavernous stadium with its excessive quality, I mean its excess, too many people, claustrophobic, a swirling madhouse of chaos. The stadium is a vortex of true and complete chaos. I mean it's not exactly bucolic, being as it is in New York City, though outside of Manhattan, in Queens, it is unpretentious, gutty. Of course I like it that way. Stan's Sports World and Stan's Sports Bar populated the area. Pulsating with madness. What I like best is when the young men come straight from work, in their suits and ties and sunglasses, emanating a certain gentility or plain American history. They come in pairs or threes. Brave of them to withstand the heat and the chaos, for the sake of their innocent sport, and dashing of them in their cavernous, unlovely stadium, in the bad conditions, losing. The gallantry of their broken dreams and shining hopes in each situation, such as the doubleheader Friday night.

One thing about baseball that used to hurt my feelings, though of course my understanding is limited, was when they made trades. They kept making huge dramatic trades at deadlines in the middle of the night. They traded the handsomest player. They traded the one who had been there the longest. They made so many trades of sentimental favorites that the only possible consolation

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I could find for them was that the game itself is the only constant.

I found it to be poignant. But then again, I find a lot of things to be poignant.

So, on certain Fridays since this April, Hobby started taking me to the baseball games. Our entire relationship revolves around baseball. As he is an athlete and ex-jock, and now I am a sports fan even though I used to hate sports, like many a woman, I don't doubt. But now it's like I'm glued to the radio—"Don't bother me, the football game is on." Football. Not only baseball but every other sport in existence. Though of course baseball is the most elegant, has the most grace, is the most quaint.

The baseball game last night was truly a metaphor for the human condition. They had two rain delays, one half an hour and one, shortly thereafter, an hour. It was raining lightly even when they played. It was a night game and unseasonably cold. In short, the conditions for the fans were terrible or could not have been worse, and yet a lot of people stayed in the stadium until two in the morning. It was like a small dinner party, as the announcer said. It was the die-hards. They were like feisty old-timers who just wouldn't quit. They were a metaphor for the human condition. They were in it for the long haul, not only in perseverance, but enjoying it. You have to love the attempt, even if the attempt is a failure. Anyway they were sitting there with umbrellas in the stands at two in the morning like maniacs.

I tried to talk to Hobby about our feelings, and he was receptive, but the only problem is my talk was excessively lame. Feelings, I murmured, I have feelings too, I'm a human being—I mean, jeez, for pity's sake, what am I talking about?

"What do you think is going to happen?" I said finally.

"I think you're going to drive me crazy," he said, and looked at me sideways, askance, with those dazzling blue eyes.

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So we're just two jocks sitting in the stands at two in the morning watching a baseball game. Plus in New York, up North, how strange.

Why is it that I cannot reconcile myself with the past.

It reminds me of Gary Cooper and Marlene Dietrich eyeballing each other world-wearily in Morocco. Why is it I am pursued by my memories, with my heart broken by them.

As often in baseball, there were some late heroics. Someone saved the day at the last minute, "eking out a last minute victory," as the announcer says. How can they always eke out these last minute victories? Maybe it could be the same for us. Maybe it is not too late for us.

Some people think baseball is slow. But not only do I disagree with that, I like it when they have rain delays, extra innings and any other thing that can stretch it out even more, to be as long and slow as possible.

My whole life revolves around sports now. As time wore on Hobby also introduced me to the basketball season as exemplified by Madison Square Garden, which is like a smoldering Babylonian prison. I mean you'd think it would be plain American fun. But Madison Square Garden is more squalid than the baseball stadium. Taking the subway, you go through Pennsylvania Station where many lunatics convene. Each person is alone and yet each person is engaged in a loud conversation with himself, making an insane cacophony that reverberates throughout the place. One thing about New York: in the subway or on any street corner, any man feels free to just start spouting his philosophy. A woman spoke in tongues on the 34th Street platform; nearby was a Jamaican evangelist. Everything is shrouded in smoldering iniquity and teeming squalor. New York, the Grünewald, the sporting news.

But it is actually plain American fun. Because I have found that when you are in a theater watching a movie, say, I find that you still think about your worries, while

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watching the movie. You can't get away from your worries, even while watching a movie. If you are depressed you will be even more sad in the theater. Whereas if you are watching a baseball game, or listening to the sporting news on the radio in the ceaseless low masculine drone, or at a basketball game in Madison Square Garden, it is truly relaxing to the mind, and for that time you forget your worries. You're all in it together—lunatics, screaming sports fans chewing cigars, scuzzy men in checkered jackets with hacking coughs—you are all in it together, in something innocent.

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Rodney Jones

The Privacy of Women

Of course it's a poem no man could withstand, all that
forbidding power
Of the glance and the long sweetness of the slow
analysis,
Sweetness that drew him:
into the gristle of seeds,
That sent him away
who had given away the flintlock
Of his fire
and stood moon-open in the open spaces,
No god but that sweetness and the paralysis before
daybreak
In the eons before love,
even the stone knife a vacancy
To be filled as deeply as her intention was strange to him.

•

Tenderness of the bison
twitching its fly-besotted flank,
Certain green, certain grove, untranslatable by gesture,
And what came before the words,
the wrenching of
hunger
Or birth, unmerciful, certainty of the rock in its
arrival,
Pure sweetness of the berry
to which he returned and
returned,
Before the promise that took the dark shape of the
berry.

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She glossed me young, made heartstroke of
namesound, combing out her black hair,
Left jelly in those old jars
you see now in shoppes,
Shaped flour and lard,
the simple shape of my longing,
Praised God, praised music, gentled, in lightning and
thunder,
The terrified mare,
her place, my own place on her
porch
While the storm yet approached, delicate order of that
shivering.
I touched each dress, each coat, the closet void now
of her hands, the black rubber boots
She had worn to the lot and returned in, gloved in
dung, empty and shining.

•

And she loved the clean undershine of fine cabinets,
chairbacks grooved and carved
With the rising and falling arcs of the shapes of
flowers,
The minor key
of her sad song, to which we turned,
returning
To the by-then common argument over everything,
which was larger than the sweetness,
But transcended and augmented by sweetness.

When we have touched many breasts, we think we
know the earth
That loves us,
but the argument clings to the love
making,
The argument over everything holds us in its icy rind,
The earth holds us
in the little while of our unthinking,

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And when the breasts are withdrawn, we are the shadows
Of the breasts,
as the wife is the shadow of the mother
And the mother of many mothers,
the dark, rich seawater,
The swamp, and the forty-foot loam of the midwestern plains,
Will roll over us
as certainly as we walk down the avenue
With the one moment of our lives before us so we cannot see
The birds or hear the song of the bearded man without a home.

I have to go back to the first things
circled around the fire,
The hearthright
when the hunt returned, grateful for the corn,
Woman and man arguing over everything
sun, stars, and moon,
Both the necessary and the mistaken decisions
to move on
The chart in the womb, the chart in the testicles, the treasure map
Given lightly
and taken forward easily a hundred million years,
So I can feel myself drawn and quartered by desire's own knife.

•

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All things shining,
even our public and glittering grief,
A honey,
and the underthings of the beloved, the
regal stain
Of dark berries,
but the lovesong and the song of her loss,
I can no longer name them,
I have forgotten how they were made,
As though she had passed through the eye of the
needle that sewed
The elements into vegetation and regarded the
unfolding of my brain.

•

And now turning away from the lives of men,
I was
not one of them
Clustering on the easy blossoms
outside the Pickwick
and the Mill,
Not all the time stuck in the sweetness:
so much of the
prose of duty
Has us scrawled in the margins, he works nights at
the shipping docks,
She scrubs the surgery floors,
they meet now and then on a star,
They are not our story,
who burn briefly in that moment
That is shipwreck and rescue,
I was not chosen for any loveliness
But chose loveliness.

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•

Chose as any young man would choose
what he
thought would endure
The lie of gentleness
when she lay in that red welt of time,
Stretched inside out
on the interminable desert day of
birthing,
And spoke Samuel, our one son, I had no more
kindness to learn,
But stood in the blinding room
of that hospital blasted by snow,
And could not speak or cut the cord
when the scissors
were offered,
But was as one who feeds the queen the sticky muscle
of the blossom
And went from there
to give some comfort to my daughter.

•

For many who loved me have mired in their names
and old faces,
And are lost to me,
for I have forsaken their
knowledge
And company for this home, faraway on a remote
shelf of time,
I cannot reach them,
my brother, who taught me four cities
And the singing shapes of vowels, is a stranger to me,
his poems
Are scrawled on napkins and the backs of paper bags,
his ashes
Are scattered across the gardens of two beer halls.

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He stands at the beginning of my mind, but I did not keep him
From his life,
strung on the cleats of the winter rain,
Who had no real harbor
but the iron bed of a dump truck
And cried in his sleep,
for he dreamed of his dead mother
Resurrected in the flesh of a bride,
but I had my own bride,
My own daughter to carry over the mud and broken bottles.

•

It does not say in any book that the division will be clean
Between mother and son
or father and daughter
Who would remain tactful in the glue of the unyielding bond
Even as they are swept out in the drift of strangeness
Until one stands alone
with the dirt that starts memory
On the salt road to legend by gilt enlargements and routine omissions
Until the strangeness is made presentable,
and the other
Slowly begins to take place in the stock memorabilia
That will be as a funnel to the focus on ordinary things
That were trusted and shined,
and now are given over to strangers.

•

My love, my mother, my one daughter, my song, my salt evocation,
Given completely to their keeping,
I give up my last shyness

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As my grandfather was undressed and lowered into the water
Of his last bath
and the nurse unrolled the pink scroll
Of his shrunken genitals,
and from the sweetness of her nature,
Cleaned the crusted glans and prepared him for the last bed,
So my wife has known me
in my sloth and my drunkenness,
In the tears that were not for her,
but the forsaken life
She could not know,
for she had led me from far to this house
And could not know back there
one of the dead from another,
Who stretch tunnels in the beckoning ruins of affections
Until I must speak out or cross over to her and be silent.

So I approach my mother from the alley of my long grief
To tell her of this birth
this month of her mother's death
And find the rejuvenant table
borne up on the irrepressible
Waves of pleasure and loss,
with the one voice of the family
Tightening around me like the wooden cartilage of an old ship,
But she goes back to the fixing,
she turns from her final

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Knowledge of the dark
to the dead god of her mother,
And will not tell me, but goes back to the bringing in
And the carrying out,
she scrubs the counters to a fine
shine,
Long she scuttles the dirt into pans, long the waters
run.

•

Only late at night, there is laughter in the living
room.
There are secrets opening
in the stories of the dead
Who resemble so much the sleeping daughters and
sons.
Surely there is a mystery inside the rising and setting
sun,
Surely there is an ocean
inside the star she wished
upon
That the hip-splaying children
should crest on the slow
Burst of that fountain and take the miracle-anointing
gust
Of the ordinary light,
whose lives become our lives
drifting
Away from her
and drawn out in the cascade of
diasporas
Until we return on the new roads
as many have come
earlier
Bearing the bag of old guilts
to the address of sorrow
With the one greeting: *the ballast of death is love.*

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Thomas Lynch

Grimalkin

One of these days she will lie there and be dead.
I'll take her out back in a garbage bag
and bury her among my sons' canaries,
the ill-fated turtles, a pair of angelfish:
the tragic and mannerly household pests
that had the better sense to take their leaves
before their welcomes or my patience had worn thin.
For twelve long years I've suffered this damned cat
while Mike, my darling middle-son, himself
twelve years this coming May, has grown into
the tender if quick-tempered man-child
his breeding blessed and cursed him to become.
And only his affection keeps this cat alive
though more than once I've threatened violence—
the brick and burlap in the river recompense
for mounds of furballs littering the house,
choking the vacuum cleaner, or what's worse:
shit in the closets, piss in the planters, mice
that winter indoors safely as she sleeps
curled about a table-leg, vigilant
as any knickknack in a partial coma.
But Mike, of course, is blind to all of it—
the gray angora breed of arrogance,
the sluttish roar, the way she disappears for days,
sex-desperate once or twice a year,
urgently ripping her way out the screen door
to have her way with anything that moves
while Mike sits up with tuna fish and worry,
crying into the darkness "here kitty kitty",
mindless of her whorish treacheries;
or of her crimes against upholsteries—

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the sofas, love seats, wingbacks, easy chairs
she's puked and mauled into dilapidation.
I have this recurring dream of driving her
deep into the desert east of town
and dumping her out there with a few days' feed
and water. In the dream, she's always found
by kindly tribespeople who eat her kind
on certain holy days as a form of penance.
God knows, I don't know what he sees in her.
Sometimes he holds her like a child in his arms
rubbing her underside until she sounds
like one of those battery powered vibrators
folks claim to use for the ache in their shoulders.
And under Mike's protection she will fix her
indolent green-eyed gaze on me as if
to say: *Whaddaya gonna do about it, Slick?*
The child loves me and you love the child.
Truth told, I really ought to have her fixed
in the old way with an airtight alibi,
a bag of ready-mix and no eyewitnesses.
But one of these days she will lie there and be dead.
And choking back loud hallelujahs, I'll pretend
a brief bereavement for my Michael's sake,
letting him think as he has often said
"deep down inside you really love her don't you
Dad?"
I'll even hold some cheerful obsequies
careful to observe God's never-failing care
for even these, the least of His creatures,
making some mention of a cat-heaven where
cat-ashes to ashes, cat-dust to dust
and the Lord gives and the Lord has taken away.
Thus claiming my innocence to the end,
I'll turn Mike homeward from that wicked little grave
and if he asks, we'll get another one because
all boys need practice in the arts of love
and all their aging fathers in the arts of rage.

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Jacqueline Osherow

Fornacette, 1990, Spring

For so long, I have wanted relatively nothing
Except, perhaps, this chance to write it down:
Here, for example, near a fire in a cold house,
A wide, full valley out my window
Spread to peaks whose marble reads as snow
And, within it and beyond it, captured miracles
Urged on by mid-air orchestras of angels.
Do all of us have places we believe
Made us ourselves? When last I saw this place
I thought I played a little with those angels.
Even now, at moments, I am half convinced
The brashest of them nod in recognition.
And the others only seem so wholly still.
There are no really stationary angels.
See? They've chipped at altarpieces' gold
And etched feathermarks in frescoes' plaster
With years of hammering their hemmed-in wings.

Just staring out at trees, I think I hear them.
But I also think, with different ears, I hear
A car. This time round, if I'm alone
I'm promised an eventual return.
I've come here now with *marito* and *figlia*
Who've gone, for groceries, to the nearest town.
Now, I rack my memory for every
Animal I've seen in a cathedral
And alternate the artworks with *pasticcerie*
Where I decline *caffè* as bad for you.
For these set months I'm never quite alone.
You're listening even at this table when I speak,

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The typewriter's clatter an erratic
Extra heartbeat in your baffled ears
As they reinvent the noisy, liquid dark.

You need certainly not have come here.
I'm the whole of Italy to you.
It makes me imagine tiny frescoes
On the inside of my belly, pale gray arches
Coddling them in stately, cloistered light.
Who knows what you can see and what you can't?
We might be staring from some chapel wall.
Where are we? In Italy? At home?
There's beaten gold around my hair and ears,
Your reckless excess, as you tap the store
Your sister left behind. She, like you,
Was lavish with the gold. For months and months,
Feeding her, I felt its burn behind me,
The fiery skirts of saints on either side.

I had meant to tell your sister this
And other things that now will cloud with you,
How, once, when she was screaming in her bath
I saw again the red, wet, twisted face
I saw when the volcano, my own self,
Had stilled, and was, again, momentarily
Off-balance, wondering who she was, as if
The terrible extortion had no purpose.
But there was the enormous, furious face,
Its slippery torso still attached to me,
Singed by what they call an angel's kiss,
A fleeting pair of lips above one eye.

Listen. Through the valley, ringing bells
Are just unsynchronized enough to stretch
The noon into a hundred eight o'clock
And cuckoos chant the minute, not the hour
With base notes for the more ambitious birds
That crowd into these oaks' unkempt cantorium.

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Can you hear any of this? Or only me?
For a little while, I would almost make
Your listening the other way around;
I'd fade into the twittering and bells
And let their near, habitual music speak
What I'm never able to write about your father.

For one thing, he prefers music to words,
Has made your sister an aficionado
Of the tambourines and bongos of the buskers
Who rouse old echoes in these hillside towns
And, for another, it's too difficult to write
About a love that isn't unrequited
And only manages to write itself
In shopping lists and notes about who's phoned
And, once, briefly, on a smallish square of paper
I folded in a box when we were moving:
Ten: fifty-three, eighty seconds, ten: fifty-eight . . .
The nervous record of our final night
In ignorance of love's routine extravagance,
Its willingness to move so far beyond us
That it requires another face, another voice.

The other day, your sister stretched a finger
Toward the ceiling in the town hall of Siena
And showed your father and me the "busker angels."
And while he taught her *zither, harp* and *lute*
I wandered toward the canopied Madonna
And then looked out the window at a hillside
I had just seen frescoed in another room.
What changes then in seven hundred years?
Not the Madonna, saints and angels, not
The hillside, not the thin, exquisite guise
Of miracle in this already teeming world
That weaves within its curving solid greens—
These fields and woods and vineyards here below
me—

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Elaborate skeins of yellow, purple, red;
Where rabbits leap from battle in the Paolo Uccello
And you, for this brief time, are always here
And angels pilfer grace notes from the air
To herald now, along with shifting gears,
Your father and sister's near arrival home.

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Two Poems by Henri Cole

Une Lettre á New York

If it's spring in the city, have the marchers,
each one with a shrieking whistle, short-circuited the streets,
their cause as grave as the dirty cabs growling at their feet?
Is Paul Taylor at the City Center? Has my architecture-
grad-student-subtenant remembered Sting, a pet squirrel
whose appearance each May on the fire escape ledge
is as celebrated as our pink dogwood's flowering? Privileged
as she is, eating Arabian almonds all these years, if she's early
and hears me in the shower, she knows to come right in.
Will Joe, my Italian barber still tell me what to do in life,
reading my moods in his mirror—his razor like a fruit knife
against the peach's flesh instead of the proud artist's chin?
Will a burglar have borrowed my red Schwinn from the rooftop,
the rusty chain foiling a smooth delirious escape?
With pom-poms swinging on their skimmers like grapes,
does a Colombian troupe still serenade commuters stopped,
even in gray business suits, by a tug on the heartstrings,

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the subway chasm converted into a dream of
disembarking?
Does the beggar on my block, who says his name is
Marx,
still wear a deeper tan than mine? Will souls of three
sleeping
friends—May, Lola and Vladimir—visit in the
evening,
arranging themselves in the ailanthus outside my
window?
If they smile and blink as from some Broadway video,
it will by an urban bequest for those who could not
say good-bye,
their numinous bodies dissolving then into July's
fireflies,
whose lanterns alchemize my cheap paper shades into
Chinese silk.
Each of you who writes reports illness, pain from love
spilt,
or someone who's gone to the other side, yet
correspondence tries
to be uplifting, disproving Judas who writes man's sad
history.
Could he have been right who said there was earth
and man
in the beginning, that we created God, that we
created Heaven,
in our want or need for something more than awful
elegy?
The little island wedged between three rivers,
from which our letters come and go, is the
personification of hope.
The buildings are black and white like sonnets. And
enveloped
in between, the first sweet cherries of the season are
being delivered.

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Marius, Son of Sarkis,
Named for the Roman Consul,
Savior from the Barbarians,
Putative Husband of Mary Magdalene

is feeding his canaries on the terrace
when the Gypsies start to sing.
Dinner candles have long guttered,
and the white sun's empty sheath littered
the room with dusk.

In the distance: barking of hounds,
static from a radio broadcast,
scraping back of chairs as the world
rises from its supper to see where the music
is coming from.

A sirocco blows the yellow feathers
almost imperceptibly. In the port,
where chariots once landed, airplanes crisscross
a perfectly inked Mediterranean line.
Of those beloved,

Marius thinks, when the tambourines start to play,
only Job, his sad finch, survives, whistling
to a melon slice as if it were the moon.
It is the end of a century. Button quails
undo their masks.

If Marius should ask himself, roused by the night,
Have the gods forgotten me?
the Gypsies in their caravans,
like a babel of sailors, will sing him
some vain reply.

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Portfolio

Landscapes

Jan Groover

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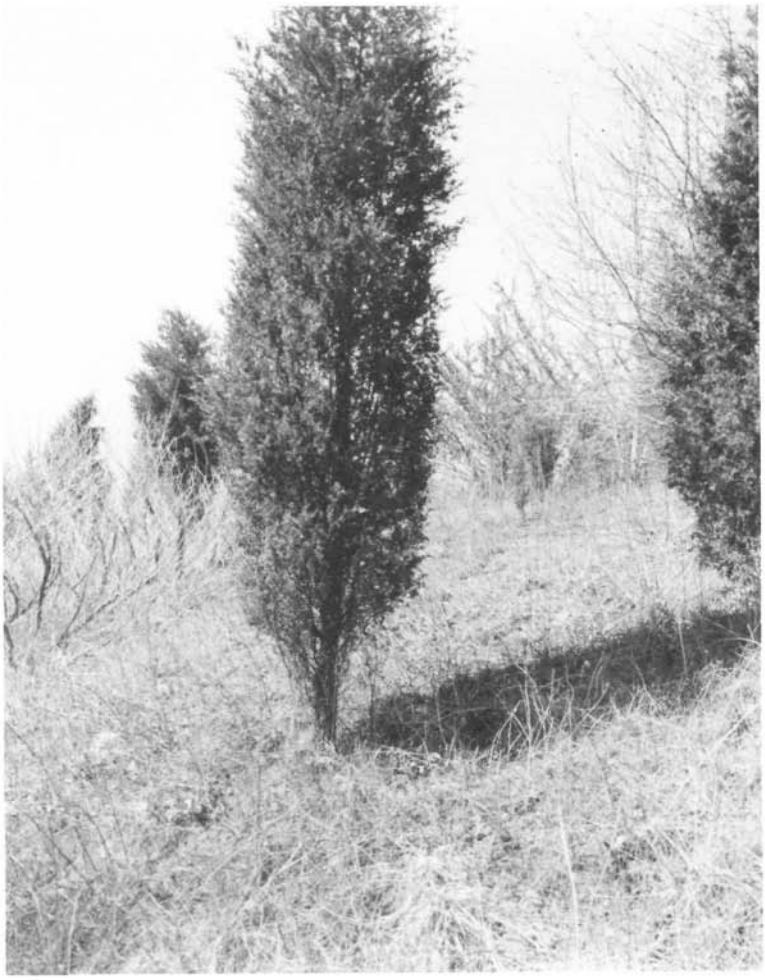

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Portrait of the Yellow Apricot Tree

Norman Manea

The break had been going on for who knows how long; time was passing by unchecked. The men opened their notebooks, leafed through them noiselessly, shifted their behinds on the school benches, sharpened their pencils or cleaned their pens. A faint rustling could barely be heard. The sunlight cascaded evenly. It was as if, though changing, everything had frozen in place, in an even gray mist.

The gestures seemed the same, familiar. Only the fear seemed to have lost its vigor; it had become more humble, slowing down the movements.

They were all wearing identical shiny black suits. Laundered shirts, glistening white, with stiff collars pinched together by the sharp triangle of a tie. Some were bald, some had become paunchy. There was the glitter of an occasional medal, of rings on fingers, of a blond beard.

But they'd retained something . . . the smile on a

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flaccid cheek, a movement, a greeting . . . since they had spotted me and were happy to see me again, they sent friendly signals my way.

Sleep had immersed me in the old classroom. I didn't know how long I had been looking at their faces, at their hands, at their suits. I didn't dare check whether my hands had become as large as theirs, nor touch my suit or feel my tie to see whether they were the same too.

But there wasn't time, because the written examination was about to begin; they too should have been as terrified as in the past. And maybe they really were . . . some were rolling up tiny crib sheets and tucking them into their shoes. One, I noticed, had hid his in a crack in the bench. It was probably Rednik, unrecognizable now behind those incredibly thick glasses, were it not for the usual ink stains on his hands and on his trousers too.

Many had unbuttoned their jackets—you could even see their suspenders! Those sweating more profusely had loosened their collars and ties. One kept nervously twisting the ring on his finger. The huge fellow by the hat rack was relentlessly opening and shutting a thin, gilt cigarette case: it might have been Grigore, grown fat beyond measure and still sickly, because he was wearing—you could see it under his jacket—the same thick wool sweater. So they could still be recognized, even though they had become fat and weary, squeezed inside the elegant carcasses of their black suits.

Perhaps at least some of these family men had not forgotten the dreaded eve of the written examinations, the broken sleep, the nights of fear, the afternoons before the execution. Surely others also saw suddenly appear before them the specter of the one who corrected our untidy writing, our jumbled sums, with his long, skinny arms. It was pointless to turn the page; he would appear on the next one too, and the next, even the cover. I could not get rid of him even when I cast aside the

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notebook, not even when I buried my nose in the algebra book and, later, the trigonometry book. . . . He turned up everywhere, always the same pale figure, heavy lidded, glued to the edge of the blackboard in his usual posture, observing the hostile rows before him. He was no longer allowed to strike us. The year we first knew him—the first year of high school—the brutalities that calmed him had been forbidden. He tolerated us, we felt, with more and more difficulty, and with the same doggedness with which he tortured us. Our terror was as intense as his tolerance.

He would clench the fingers of his right hand around his belt as if they were claws. The belt seemed ready to pounce on us from the page of a textbook or a notebook, like a snake, to bloody our guilty faces.

At times he was able to satisfy his fury on a group of five or six. Other times he erupted when no one expected it, and I couldn't tell whether he was shouting at me or if he was already on to someone else. I could already see myself being pushed back among the dumb ones at the back of the class, tumbling with every new setback, making way for the next, falling lower and lower into the abyss, losing my voice, my wits, the strength to rise again.

I had come back to see them; I was, in fact, among those sitting in the rear. But my colleagues did not seem in the mood for jokes and horseplay. It seemed that they would no longer put up with the disapproval and contempt reserved for those who stayed back. Their profiles and their faces had become set, imperturbable. Their features had carved out a slightly somnolent, hermetic dignity. Very likely maturity had taught them to deal with complications. In any event, they appeared far readier than in the old days for any contingency. Even for the one awaiting us.

They pretended to have forgotten the character walking between the rows of desks, stopping at the shoulder of one suspect or other.

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Better to be like those who understood immediately, once the questions were announced, that they did not stand a chance, and proceeded to fill their notebooks with any kind of nonsense.

Sometimes he seemed to catch on to the game. You could sense him smiling, about to explode; a spark would have been enough. You would have every reason to feel gratified if you imagined him alone in his room with the memory of your provocation.

I could not figure out which of the gentlemen around me would still have been capable of such a feat. I did not have time to examine each one; the bell was ringing. The sound had not perturbed them; they simply consulted their watches. They had straightened their backs and were waiting in a pregnant, icy calm. Did I also have a watch? I could not lift my arm. I seemed to be inside a dense cloud that oppressed and hampered my movements. There was a gigantic sneeze. I waited for the inevitable laughter to break out. Of course everyone had recognized Lazaroaie's trumpet; he was dying of fear as well. But no one batted an eyelid this time.

Then we all found ourselves standing. The door had opened, I dreamed; we had gotten up, I believe, then sat down again. Each one of us placed his notebook in front of him; no one raised an eye. He had thrown his briefcase soundlessly on his desk. He had turned toward us. I had the courage to glance up at him. He seemed paler and—a true miracle, a real coup!—he had smiled. Everything was suspended, along with us, but the light had become more intense, as had the whiteness of the walls, the windows.

They had probably felt the change too. They had lifted their heads, they saw him, but they did not seem frightened by the gash that the benevolent grimace had opened in his pale mask.

The dream had dressed them correctly. The worthy bureaucrats and family men did not notice that he wasn't

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wearing the clothes he used to. The dingy gray outfit that had flapped continually about his emaciated body was now replaced by a greenish uniform, closed at the neck. Small military lapels transversed by black stripes, the jacket pulled in at the waist by a wide belt. The boots were knee high, and over them billowed the pleats of carefully pressed trousers.

The jacket in particular fitted him to perfection. And the narrow, shiny boots also showed off his litheness, his flexible, razor sharpness. They looked at him, bewildered. They could no longer hide behind their old school uniforms, nor could they find the right gestures, now that he too no longer hid behind the rags of the familiar suit but had revealed himself in all his true and grand splendor, stiff and regal.

The funereal atmosphere of the classroom during the math assignment prevented them from being taken unawares and distracted by so many surprises. Taking advantage of this, they hunched, concentrating, over their notebooks. The head in front of me showed discoloration, and I realized that Mr. Ianuli dyed his hair to keep it black and shiny, the way it used to be. At the blackboard, the sentry stood waiting for us to copy the examination paper's title.

He had forgotten to assign us as many subjects as there were rows of students, as was his custom. Across the entire width of the board, in orange chalk and with big, round letters, he had written a single theme for us all. He then stepped to one side so as not to obstruct our view.

They bent over their notebooks, immobile: the dream had frozen. They looked at the blank pages as if in a daze; perhaps they would never come to life again, but the light became steadily clearer, as did the air in the room: purer and purer. A delicate and agreeable breeze touched every forehead. They lifted their eyes again, rejuvenated and serene, and smiled at him. But he had turned his back, he didn't see them anymore.

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He was always blocking some section of the blackboard with his narrow body, especially with the rapid movements of his long arms. With one hand he wrote, with the other he erased and corrected. He kept covering the black screen with colored symbols, always different ones, which I only became aware of, without understanding them, when he shifted from one end of the blackboard to the other.

The silence lasted for quite some time. I followed the movement of his arms into a box of multicolored chalks and into another box, much larger, filled with colored clay, bits of which he kneaded a little between his fingers before applying to the board. The blackboard became more and more colorful, alive with red and brown and green spots, dusty areas burnt by the sun.

One could hear the sound of laughter, weak at first, then growing louder and louder; it was the first time that something like that had happened. Bursts of laughter, whispers, rattling, whistling. But if you turned toward the class you would have seen nothing. The rows were perfectly aligned, the dutiful, respectable gentlemen staring with big, frozen eyes either at the board or at their notebooks.

I thought I heard a squeak of laughter nearby. I looked at my neighbor. Black suit, tie, shirt like the others. A shiny, gold-plated pen. A small, sharp, mouselike face with pockmarked skin. Things were coming back to me, but here was one I did not recognize. His hair was completely white, and he had small, well-looked-after hands. He was missing a finger on his right hand. He was smiling too, a kind smile, guilty. He pointed his hand toward the cigarettes beside his notebook. Friendly, shy gestures. The look of a nice man. He was repeating the offer when I caught sight of the same title, transcribed on the first page of his notebook. His handwriting was messy, with tall, spiky, cuneiform letters. But he had copied

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correctly from the blackboard: PORTRAIT OF THE APRICOT TREE.

The noise had grown to a veritable tumult. I did and I did not hear it. It seemed that they had even begun to push the desks around. A happy pandemonium possessed them all. I would have turned to catch them in the act, wild and riotous, had I not known that they would have stopped dead the moment I laid eyes on them.

But it was not necessary anyway, because something else had interrupted them. The revolt died down, you couldn't hear a sound. Something around us had changed again. The air, the light had become rarefied. I too felt the breeze, a waft of fresh air.

In effect, the windows had opened of their own accord: The air that was drifting in was scented, cooler, a little humid. I was able to look at them. They seemed surprised, subdued, timid, their brows refreshed by the breeze.

I saw him again too, by the blackboard, as at the beginning, standing in his uniform of a proud wild beast.

We remained in front of him only a moment, no longer. We were shrinking into enraptured, silly schoolchildren. A long, inaudible cry of pleasure welled up within us. The same gratified smile appeared on the large, flaccid faces of the functionaries.

Only then did I feel a closeness to them. Something sweet and fresh was enveloping us.

The landscape on the board had expanded into a bizarre relief of dark, clayey soils; of gentle hills covered in green, sparkling moss; of small pine trees on which hung pointed, coffee-colored cones that bombed the resplendent, green-grass sea.

We had come back to life, enraptured by the unfolding view, by the new fragrance of the forest.

His hunter's or perhaps woodsman's uniform and the pallor that lengthened and sharpened his features no

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longer seemed to frighten the ex-students; they had grown used to them. They were participating, I felt, as eagerly as I was in the convenient surprise provided by the landscape. He observed them tenderly, with a restrained, worn-out hatred; with a sort of welcome, in fact. I could hear around me the hushed rustling of their stealthy, unsure gestures, the intermittent words, a cry of joy, gentle breathing, as in the past; the indolent bustling, the impatience of an agitated anthill; small squeaks of pleasure, soothed panic, and the care taken to temper violent outbursts, lest the fairy-tale spell be broken. Indeed, any rash imprudence might have ripped the film that moistened our eyes.

A strange undercurrent of terror lent a certain fragility to the wait. The windows were dripping, licked by long veins of water.

The glass itself seemed to have become liquid, evaporating in the light, cool fog that had made our clothes feel less heavy, that had tinted the benches and the walls, rocking us. We were lost in a cloud of floral giddiness. A sunny, complete liberation.

I could no longer see my distinguished colleagues. With a grinding effort I managed to unscrew myself from the spot in which I had remained petrified.

Using all my strength, I turned abruptly toward them. The air had somehow become a fog of fine ash, yellowish red, purplish or golden, I don't know, it was like a thin, occluding smoke. I could barely make them out, crowded together, enveloped in the distance. In the corner of the classroom I succeeded in distinguishing the three majestic trees, the coatracks, on which the hats of the distinguished gentlemen dangled like melons, because the light had changed little by little to a pale, sickly green that was blurring the edges of everything.

My schoolmates were wriggling about somewhere, their tumbling and the field at times seemed just a step away. Their neckties had come loose, they were flapping,

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as were their jackets with the long vents at the back. Sparkles of cufflinks and medals. One could hear a whisper, a muffled panting. The grass was charged with strange currents that sparked at the slightest touch. Blades of grass chased around their hairy nostrils toward the large, red ears. Wreaths of flames pushed forth continuously at the mere contact with the hair on the hands or with the mustache of some bureaucrat or other. And then they would disappear once again, swallowed up by the landscape.

I turned, exhausted, toward my neighbor. I could no longer see even him clearly. Only his grown-up face flushed with contentment. He was crunching on candy; *he offered me his bag full of sweets, red and round*, small, sticky bombs. He belched with gusto, radiant with uncontainable joy. He had spread his arms wide to show me the dozens of photographs lined up on his desk. They were pictures of a child in every conceivable position and at every conceivable age. They were of his son, or perhaps of himself as a child; but our breathing kept fogging up the prints. The exultation dissolved him too, too quickly, and I lost sight of him.

I managed to remember the notebook, to retrieve the words that were written there. The others kept slipping away, remote, into the tunnels of the forest, on the thin wind that ruffled their hair. I tried to tear myself away from the vertiginous fragrances and colors. I wanted to discover, standing out in relief on the blackboard, the apricot tree.

For a long moment I could discern no more than hills of cracked clay, small lichen islands, the distorted reflection of the tall grass that tangled itself against the shoulders of trees weeping tears of sap. Dry acorns, old, grayish pinecones. . . . The landscape seemed gradually to be giving itself up to dusk.

A fine, silting powder of purplish chalk was coming down, then the darkness. I still succeeded in making out, down toward the right, below the rim of a dune, some

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yellowish marks and thin, reddish stripes, perhaps the place of the apricot tree. The stillness was not merely silence. A whispering murmur of calm, cold waters. A perfect, total peace. The petals opened and closed, vibrant, like the air that silently rocked the spiny branches of the pines. Light, shiny missiles flew through the air; you could hear the hail of fresh fruit as it pelted us.

For an instant I felt their hot down caress my face; my mouth was filled with freshness. But I knew that in reality I was different, heavier and older, tortured by other dreams in which the trials of the past were revived, overturning my age, and keeping me from becoming a grown man; but now my body and my mind had become clearer; I felt young, alive, happy, and I didn't want it to end. It rained luminous apricots, small, golden balls, the branches arched and sprang back, whipping the air. I saw the vault of the sky—spherical, azure, calm. How they once had dragged, those suddenly all-too-short afternoons before the examinations, the executions. You hardly knew how to pass the time. All the courtyards were empty; refusing rest and nourishment, I would steal among the gray clouds where phantoms lurked and the vitreous dome of night had ballooned.

The apricot tree had revealed itself once more; again there were the reassuring yellow circles that lit the sky with the gold of firm, dense fruit. As I ventured into the depths of the blackboard, the relief opened up protectively with a murmur of invisible waters that cooled my brow.

I was more and more alone; my distinguished colleagues had disappeared. I could not find a trace of the agitation of the schoolboys. I was lost, mad with delight. I wanted to dance for joy, hysterical; I wanted to see them, reanimate that foolish intoxication of the past, out of whose grinning mouth we tumbled, little cannibals squeezed into tight suits and throttled by ties that

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burned like torches. But I was slumbering in a gentle exhaustion I had never experienced before. Serene and alone, I filled the entire notebook, open to the page that bore the colored chalk imprint of a big, wrinkled hand.

The evening wind burned my lips and brow. Barbarous sunsets, facing the barracks, before the executions, the examinations. . . . So he had reappeared, hands smudged with red and all other colors of chalk, walking down the rows of the condemned. He was snarling with that same indulgence and holding his palms high so as not to soil his uniform. He was coming closer, I could feel it; he had taken the first step.

Fear seized me again, encircled me, whirled me to the surface. But the enchantment had not abandoned me yet, the waves were receding without haste. Sleep was ebbing, though it still had me and my eyes in its embrace.

He approached slowly, almost imperceptibly. I was shaking; the wait had exhausted me, disturbed me. Now he drew near and stroked my hair gently. He wiped the last traces of color on my head, then lowered his heavy hand; I felt it on my arm. As if he had chosen me, as if he were telling me that my hour had come.

I could not move. He was shaking me carefully by both shoulders, but I was transfixed. I did not move. I could not free myself of the apricot tree, of the sky laden with fruit and leaves, of the peace of deserted afternoons, of the childish trembling, as if I were delirious. Unfamiliar words would continue to encroach upon me, I could sense it.

The magic, the fear, the sun of the apricot tree, the protective silence of trees, the soft, golden clay, would have endured, just as before. . . . The hand slid down my brow, toward my neck, on my shoulders, inside my damp shirt, on my thin, frail bones. Incredibly, I was grown like my colleagues! They too had lost their par-

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ents; they could no longer have understood or treasured the wonder, the sickness, the exhaustion of so splendid a night, a night from which I should have awakened a grown, healed man.

He was shaking me, but I could not get up. I was trying with all my strength to gain some time, to put off the moment . . .

—translated from the Rumanian
by Cornelia Golna

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Laurie Sheck

Filming Jocasta

You must not show her face. Only the hands
where each granite planetary knuckle
slowly pales as if submerged in water, stripped down
as after seizure,
those hands that now hold nothing.

And the rope; umbilical, predatory,
how it hangs so strictly from the ceiling
while her robes waft with such softness against the
backdrop
of the palace walls, harsh walls. As if to say, But once
she was a child, once swaddled, innocent, even she,
the long ago and ever after faintly beating in each
cell.

Then bring the camera closer, closer in,
it is important not to lie. And show how the robes are
crevices
of riddled light, how innocence is touched
by fraudulence; there is no other story, other text.
No music to accompany her body. Only the slow
turning of the rope.
Only that score that is no score, how silence is the
voice
of damage, its taped mouth.

And her shadow on the wall, freakish curtain oddly
beating
in the wind, blurred inscription of some lost intention;
let the camera hold it for a moment, then move on.
Here is the empty room, how large it is, how drafty.

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And her smallness, for a moment, so pitiful within it;
the room like a mouth that can't speak, like the
silence her body
has become, her body like a severed tongue.
And then let her body and the room become a city

where the hollowed laws are quiet, the gated
storefronts quiet.
And all throughout the city's central district
there are rows of display cases, necklaces glittering
on velvet covered cardboard shaped like collarbones
and necks.
Blue velvet, diamonds, gold. And rings lined up in
rows,
hat pins poised like silver birds, white gloves
on plaster hands. City that turns and turns
on its invisible cold rope, and the shadows of the
awful tapered hands.

No one has found her yet,
her body white as streetglare, the cold glow of the
unbought
still poised there, waiting to be bought. Her hands
frozen
as if molded, waiting. But still there is the question of
her face,
the horrible purple, the messiness of crime.
The way the eyes bulge out like vats of half-spilled
paint, innards churning in the wind.
Not even eyes now, really, but the aftermath of eyes,
exploded. At least the frozen hands are whole,
as if some innocence remained within them even to
the end.
But there was no innocence in the eyes.
And the hands cannot cover them.

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Gerrit Henry

Alone At Last

I sat at the bedside,
as I'd seen my sister do.
I told him things
I never dreamed I knew.
I held his tired, skeletal hand
for ten or eleven minutes,
during which time I looked
at him, at the colonial rug
on the floor, at him,
at my copy of *Roger Rabbit*
in the bedroom bookshelves,
deciding I would ask for it back.

I kept wanting to get away,
but kept wandering into his room
nonetheless. There was a faint
odor of spittle to him
the day I left, but nothing rank or
objectionable, except the way death
had found him and was leaving him,
a helpless wanderer on the shores
of a much vaunted immortality.

I'm not sure I care about
that kind of immortality, or if
there is any, or how it would feel
to be going there for good,
leaving behind the family you've sired
and your few friends, your proud
stake of land on storied Cape Cod,
your wife of a thousand days,

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your children and their many problems,
and the stimulus that provided, and the pain.
Sunday night as I was leaving the room,
I turned around, and he was vaguely waving to me,
a gray arm raised above his head.
I waved back. I ran out.

Maybe this poem will make me immortal,
not mere death—a circumstance
none can escape or plan
or hope for or abandon.
Back in New York, I won't water the plants—
the two pathos that are left to me
after the condo's limitless skyward construction
across the street, blocking the sun
until two o'clock in the afternoon,
and then, having the sun for only seven minutes.

I can't get down to writing until ten
or eleven o'clock at night.
I spend hours crying, precious afternoon hours
when I would normally be doing my best work,
and I say, agreeing with myself,
"This is bad, huh?"
But what can the dumbstruck say?

I have to go to Los Angeles
a week from today on business—
or what I call "business,"
profitless pastime that it is—
and, although I dread it—
the arriving and the mutual staring,
the asking for and the sullen receiving,
the doing and forgetting—
I can't wait to go.
I tell people I like flying,
which is partly true,
and partly an addiction to

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getting off the ground for good, for the moment.
Life, I think, is relatively harmless
until death; at which point you realize
that all you ever strove to give up
was not only the essence,
but the substance of it all,
and each time you tried to give it up
you moved a little closer to death's convenient
vacancy.

Vacancy, indeed, is what I feel, and tragedy.
I hazily remember Henry James's dying words—
something along the lines of "Live all you can,
or you'll regret it,"
or maybe it was just "Live all you can."
Nor do I see my father approaching some czar of the
heavens,
his hat in his hands, tears streaming
down his lonely face— "Well, what did *you*
do with your life, James? Excuse me—Jim?"
Although I sense he won't need a lawyer
to explain this, as I surely will.
I regret it deeply, all of it.
I regret being born, to see this.
I regret what I didn't say,
and what I did,
and what I might have,
and what I couldn't.
Now he'll never know
he was my hero.
Still, he was no ordinary kind of man.
He asked for the sun,
but was given instead the sunlit path he trod.

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Karl Kirchwey

Liberators

A lovely suburban colonial,
built in the 1950s
(that era of civil defense)
had a bomb shelter in the basement
with a quality of darkness within darkness,
and an arched ceiling of corrugated iron,
like the Nissen huts he lived in
at Wendling during the war.

There were nights he woke up screaming.
Once again the crooked black threads
would flee across the indifferent
bowl of the sky (imperfections
of adult vision) as he hung
in the sling of the turret. Then a single
thread would unravel in an instant,
an impact, a flash, a shriek

of duralumin, into knowledge greater
than anything he knew or wanted to know.
Crawling forward along a catwalk,
the bomb bay underneath him
flooded with high-octane fuel,
he arrived in the cockpit just in time
to see the copilot beheaded
by a twenty millimeter cannon shell.

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We often went down there to play,
and rubbed the heels of our hands
into our eyes until the light
exploded behind our eyelids
in crawling retinal patterns.
And sometimes darkness, like an ancient
sea, would cast up a fleece-lined
aviator's mitten, a web belt, khaki overalls.

We lay in the darkness till panic
took shape in us, like the pure cold
of thirty thousand feet, or coagulant
dread, taught to flow in a channel
of dreams; like the fountain of learning
he could not stop. Then we groped, clutching
these souvenirs, toward where the baffles
hid daylight, by which we were blinded.

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Robert Levy

New Age

Fingering the tourmaline amulet
strung around her neck, she hopes to channel
a "plasma"—ethereal and healing—
that might resuscitate her blood. Doctors,

who've perused her corpuscles many times
these months, still offer the same prognosis:
strange invaders in her veins. Neither
holistic medicine, cognitive

therapy nor harmonic convergence
have managed to eradicate the plague
that's ground her life to dust. *She is my friend,*
I think, *and she is crazy.* I am caught

between a rock and a sacred place,
trying, pathetically, to comfort her
within the bounds of what I consider
rational and sane. She tells me Librans

are known for their recuperative powers.
I nod. After lunch, she hugs me good-bye,
then grabs me, hard. This is not about sex.
It is, though, about bodies—healthy ones

that have not rebelled. She looks up at me
for a sign. *What a lunatic,* I think,
even while I hold her as hard as I can,
trying to be a crystal for her fear.

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Robert Bensen

The Truth about Everything

Take a flat map . . . and here is East,
and there is West, as far as
two points can be put; but reduce this
flat Map to a roundnesse,
which is the true form, and then
East and West touch one another,
and are all one.

—John Donne
"Sermon on Psalm" 89:48

I

The bright green bulbs of apples crop up overnight.
I didn't dream their soggy *thup* on the lawn
or the tree's tarnished sconces for those home-grown
bulbs
that dawn kindles, then eclipses.

They succumb to their own camouflage,
scattered like the helmets of deserters. I dig a trench
behind the tomatoes to shovel them in, the bruised,
the battered, the unripe that couldn't hang on.

Some had already blackened into manna
for the spawn of sluggish yellow jackets that tap
my knuckles with their abdomens, too stoned
on juice fermented in the fruit to sting.

Sometimes I pick one full of workers in
mid-excavation,

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the little gluttons' pincers crammed with apple,
and fling it in the box to watch their cavorting
danse macabre. When I really want to play God,

I imagine the apples falling on one side of the globe,
and on the other, the footfall of famine-struck
multitudes.
Between them, Earth rolls around heaven all day:
parched and flooded, blighted and blessed.

II

A clothes-hanger solar system helped me survive
fourth grade. Each planet was an ornament too odd
even for the teacher's Christmas tree, though selected
with fit logic: Mars was crackled ruby glass,

Venus a chaste, flocked white, Saturn girdled with a
glued-
on rope of golden foil, Jupiter a variegated glitter,
Neptune silk-screened with Tridentine fleurs-de-lis,
Pluto a blank of styrofoam. Earth, ah! I remember it
well,

because I had the same steel bank at home—crimped
equator,
a slot for pennies across Labrador. We learned our
treasure
was there, every country a different color,
and latitude and longitude were so natural

for years I believed the ocean was roped off in grids
for protection, like the beach at the Indiana dunes.
A few cents slam dunked at the Arctic Circle could
throw
the solar system out of whack, but we were little, and
besides,

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the mobile doubled as a model atom for the upper grades.
In this we saw the least and greatest things
appear remarkably the same; though in that lie we saw
the truth of everything would be different from what we saw.

III

I was counting on my fingers, each one another
thousand of the years I'd sleep if I left
now to reach Alpha Centauri, which on the model's scale
was orbiting Ohio. Hope Oliver, my good, sweet Hope,

heard me counting under my breath, turned
to shush me, but put her elbow on my desk instead,
leaned her cheek on her palm, and just looked.
It must have been then that I first entered

the black hole of a woman's eye: my first discovery.
That was Friday. On Saturday, a minute organism no one
suspected so thrived in the meningial lining of her spine
that her fever shot up so far so fast she died.

We must have talked about it in the classroom Monday;
what was spinal meningitis, how did she get it,
how come we didn't know, why not, who else might have it?
I thought, if she had given anyone this disease,

she'd have given it to me. I waited.
I felt my forehead and cheeks. No fever,

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nothing. Just her name scratched in capitals, ever so
lightly, neatly, on the rounded edge: HOPE.

IV

I was miserable so long they bought me a flashlight.
Who else? My folks, who did everything they could.
We tested it, my dad and I, after dark.
The high beam shot its moon onto the garage,

shot clear across the backyard and alley,
across the empty lot, onto the brick apartments
across Raynor, and into the living- and the bedrooms
of people with undrawn blinds at sundown.

On clear nights all that summer, I went out
and worked the button that sent flashes
in my thumb's improvised code, stuttering
into an astronomical number of stars, including one

whose light would not reach us during this life.
Still, their beams are on a crossing course,
bend and spiral down the curved universe
and whatever had become of us, all consciousness,

would see this and be glad. But stars, we learn,
are most inhospitably incandescent controlled
thermonuclear explosions, not little girls' souls.
Still, if their twinkling arrives so friendly,

so frankly like her eyes, and the resemblance holds
for twenty Junes or twenty thousand, might it not
hold
as long as necessary for the universe to finish
its foolishness, so that those ten small years might

come round again, and who dares say they cannot?

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Eight Poems by Paol Keineg

A

At the left, the ax; at the right, the saw.
The ax in the block, the saw on the sawhorse.
Sawdust smothers the walk. Sitting in the
shed to watch the rain come down. Some opposition
before the whole picture dissolves into nothingness.
Threatened later by the willingness to believe
it there. Reading time in the shed, rhythmic
fall of the ax in the block. Several things:
teeth of the saw pressed into the palm, the
string you twist by rotating the lathe, the piercing
blue teeth. Capable of taking off in plain view,
behind the dirty panes, the pylon and its supports,
big field of potatoes, by succeeding fragments,
by counterweights, the voice, the place, the
vibrations, dilution, clockwise.

B

Berenice, Betelgeuse, Belibaste, fine-looking
names on the page, for no reason known to
me. Fall from high, lines, worthless, without
making us believe in them, they sustain us,
they negate us. Nerve, skin, guts, bulb, lobes.
Depending upon movement and multiplication.
Words displaced by the eyes and the hand,
exposed, taken back. Civil acts, and colossal.
Illumination, cracks. Coitus has its advantages.
Whatever ground is gained, is gained to the

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extent death approaches. Whatever is gained
is little. Nothing separates as much. It remains
to speak of the real. The real stinks, like the
rest.

C

Caramba! Thus cried the comic book characters
surrounded by bubbles. The problem, is that,
outside of the attic where one had piled the
comics, this word had no currency. I let it
go with regret, the more so because if I added
an *r* I would get the favorite candybar the
others got—on Thursday's mandatory outings—who
were collecting *d-h* coupons. How much did
it cost, the *carambar*, twenty or thirty years ago.
It would be easy to take off on the sweets
that stuck in our teeth, some one hundred pages, two
hundred, at a price we could all afford. Enough on
the subject of love, let's break. How to speak of it?
How to withdraw? The revery wins. The choice of
absence of accomplishment is made. Two apples in
the plate tell all we need to know about the facility
of making and unmaking.

D

Down from the web in the thorns glides a spider
with fur the color of weeds. Here I am. Desire
to please to which one adds desire to die. All
that comes from above makes things obscure.
All that, obscure, is tied up in a motion which
wrenches the heart. To take it is to pervert

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it. This is why the entire poem is for another
day. I have not taken hold: the wild broom
flames near the telephone booth, a woman
talks crushing the receiver against her ear,
I remain incapable of high thought. To grow
old does not snuff out the scruples.

E

Expanse, outside of images, big bands of green
and gray, which isn't much and doesn't resemble
any other, eddying fields, white houses, swallows,
evening star, interstellar clouds, reserve of
mistakes in order to progress, valuable remembrances,
weather held through an opening in the blue,
but the semi-circular vantage doubles, yesterday
and tomorrow, big trucks climb on the freeway,
transformers, pylons, things are happening,
little locales of the language, powerless to
express, vaporized, to work cold, to warp oneself,
to reject, where the noise of engines and disk
brakes will pass, the memory of the computers.

F

Finally I have known only the grasses of ditches
where the drunks have fallen with their chromed
bicycles of which one pedal continues to vibrate,
they are frankly carefree. Brakes, cables,
bell, the frame propped up against the ridge,
leachy water up to the rims. The cries are
drowned—mouths bite the tongue—dilated
pupils pursue the fleeing telephone lines. Me

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too, bugs on the potatoes, knickknacks on the
cabinet, I will have toured the graves, pumping.
Grave, grave the spelling is the same. Enlargement
of the hole, lowering of the body. Death is
desire's vouchsafer. One would have found
it necessary, thanks to a good set of legs,
to push the chromatic bicycle to the peaks
of subjectivity.

G

Great guys of the future, we have learned
that the chiliagon has a thousand sides, and
you whose starlight is not burdened by a bestiary,
you take the chances of the practical and
modern life. From here to the sea, there's
the moor, with the horrors of the dream and
the dim explanatory rays. On the coast a thousand
eyes are trained on the arrival of the first
light: the destruction of a people, more the
assent to destruction. Apart from adventures
of reason that open on the void, let us hold
onto signs of distress, instants of folly. Guys,
great guys, thus as we had read, the myriagon
is a polygon whose sides cannot be imagined.

H

Hash, hasher. Seated, to seat. Ah yes, ah evening.
One should take advantage of it. Summer
evening on the darkening page; the scream
of a pig whose throat is slit. On the square,
light still, Page, Pope, and King bowl for wine.

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Who knows who keeps silent behind the flickering
walls. For a long time already some partial
truths have abandoned the dining rooms: let's
cry, my friends. Let's have a hard, hard cry
and wave our big wet hankies. Let's run, my
friends, behind the balls which soar and explode.

—translated from the French
by C.D. Wright

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Daniel Wolff

Lines from Inside an Empire

Imagine our nation is a giant boy,
down on his knees in a giant kitchen—
trucks and trains and stupendous armies
marching across the mop-clean floor.

Mother (the moon) hums in the sky.
And in the watery peace beneath the porcelain sink,
a thousand soldiers stumble and die.
He tips them over with his finger.

Now, imagine the boy should cut himself.
At the first sight of his own blood,
he drops the idea of the make-believe
and, placing his hand beneath the faucet,

lets a single strand of liquid silver
band itself around his cut
and bear whatever pain he's felt
out into the larger system.

Okay. Now let's stop pretending.
Whether the boy kneels back down in his kitchen
or calls to his mother to cover his cut,
he now understands what you've known all along:

that his only power to imagine a nation
gets pumped to him through metered lines.
It's a knowledge like knowing you can turn the page.
Which he does; we do. And there lie the dead,
waiting.

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Carl Phillips

Fra Lippo Lippi and the Vision of Henley

If, in depicting the angels, I cannot
avoid something, as well, of what
the river that day cast before me,

the musculature of the rowers' arms,
together streaking the air of those
otherwise empty, unremarkable hours;

if only now, after the mechanical
drown recover drown of the oars in
their hands, do I understand wings

and the scaled–down pattern for
suffering that every wing, surely,
is lined with, do, Monsignor,

forgive me. By your grace, again,
this is what happened: at first,
only the heat, the cool water. . . .

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Four Poems by Yehuda Amichai

Human Bodies

Human bodies are different from one another
But their souls are all alike, filled with brilliant uses
Like airports.
Do not give me your soul,
Give me your body I shall never know to the end,
Give me the vessel, not the wine.

Stand with me in airports
Where the pain of parting
Is cloaked in fine words,
Like orphans,
Where drinks and food are expensive
And men and their fates are cheap.

And a man talks into a telephone
And, from the receiver, his mouth drinks
Grief and love.

Those who cry too
Have white hands like brides.
Arms free from embrace,
What will they do in the world?

Let my soul die with my body.

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Sandals

Sandals are the skeleton of a shoe.
Skeleton and only soul.
Sandals are the reins of my galloping feet
And *tefillin* straps on a foot praying and weary.

Sandals are the private piece of soil
I trod on wherever I walk.
Consuls of my country, my true land.
Skies for swarming little things beneath,
Their holocaust to come.

Sandals are the youth of a shoe
And the memory of its trek to the desert.

I don't know when the sandals will lose me
Or when I will lose them, but they will be lost,
Each in a different place:
One not far from my home
Among rocks and low bushes.
And the other will drown in sand
At the great sea,
As the sinking sun
Facing the sinking sun.

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North of Beer Sheva

Plowed land. Inside turned out
Like a man who confessed.

All the crumbling things
Are on their way to becoming one again,
Like the *One* stretching out in a loud voice
At the end of *Sh'ma Israel.*

My children in Jerusalem
Turn in their sleep toward my journeys
Into the past and into the future.

Empty rivers think I am water,
I am cloud, shadow of a cloud,
And I think, a dry riverbed.

I was left with two friends:
A geologist and a biologist.
The field between them is mine.

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Late Wedding

I sit in the waiting room with young bridegrooms,
Many years younger. Had I lived in ancient times,
I would have been a prophet. But now I'm waiting
patiently
To register my name with the name of my beloved in
the big ledger

Of marriages and to answer questions I can still
Answer. I filled my life with words,
I amassed in my body information that can feed
The intelligence services of many countries.

With heavy steps I bear light thoughts
As I bore in my childhood fate-laden thoughts
On light feet, almost dancing with so much future.

The pressures of my life bring together my birth day
And my death day, like history books,
Where the pressures of history join those two
numbers
At the name of a dead king,
Just a hyphen separating them.

I hold onto the hyphen as hard as I can,
As to a life raft. I live on it.
And on my lips the oath not to live alone.
The voice of the bridegroom and *the voice of the bride* and
the voice
Of children playing in the streets of Jerusalem
And in the towns of Yehuda.

—translated from the Hebrew
by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav

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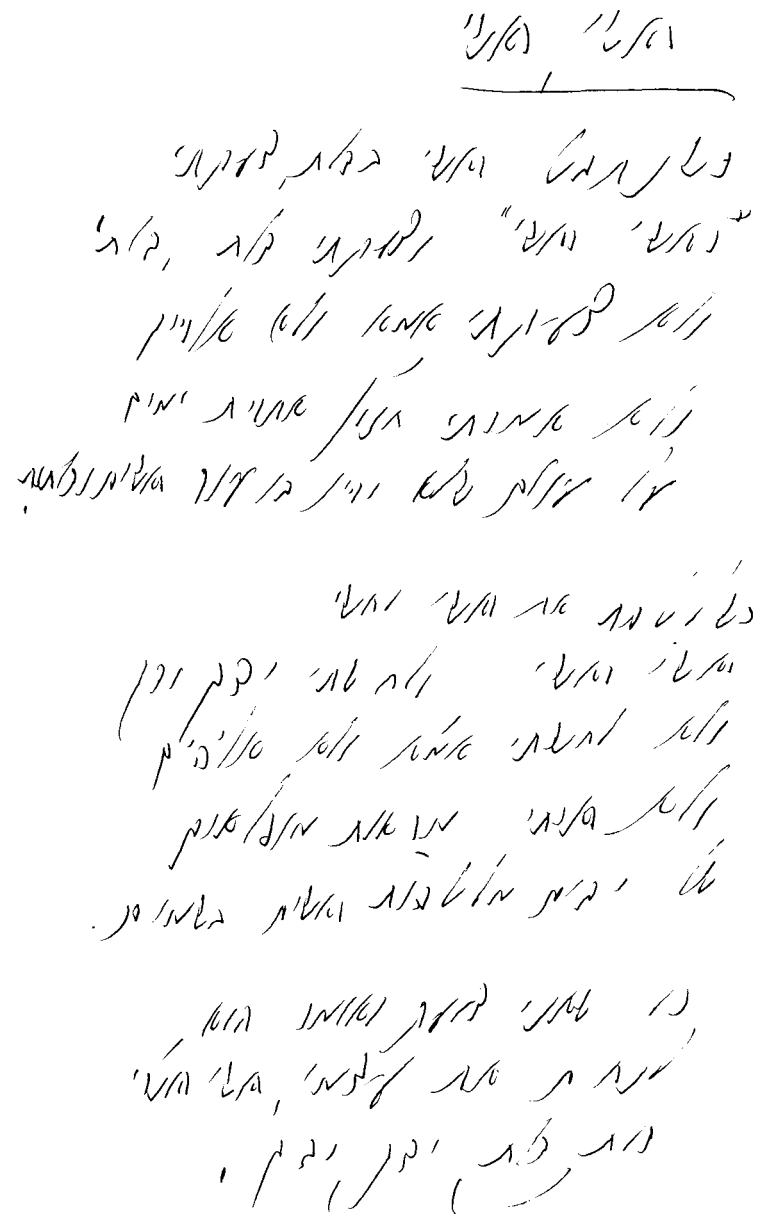

A manuscript page from a poem by Yehuda Amichai.

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Yehuda Amichai

The Art of Poetry XLIV

Born in Würzburg, Germany in 1924, Yehuda Amichai emigrated to Palestine with his Orthodox Jewish family in 1936. During World War II he fought with the Palestinian brigade of the British army in the Middle East, and he served as a commando in the Haganah underground during the 1948 war. He also fought with the Israeli army in the 1956 and 1973 wars. Amichai has worked as an elementary school teacher and has taught writing at New York University, but he devotes most of his time to writing. He moved to Jerusalem with his family in 1937, and presently resides in that city's

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Yemin Moshe district with his wife and the younger two of his three children.

Immensely popular, Amichai is generally acknowledged as being Israel's most important poet, and one of the writers who have shaped modern Hebrew literature. His books of poems sell about fifteen thousand copies each, in a nation where only three million read Hebrew. (Comparable sales in the United States would merit best-seller status.) Amichai's stature and audience are international, and he is among the most widely translated poets alive. Since 1968, sixteen books of his poetry and fiction have been translated into English, including Poems *(1969),* Songs of Jerusalem and Myself *(1973),* Amen *(1977),* Love Poems *(1980),* Great Tranquility *(1983),* Jerusalem Poems *(1988),* Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai *(1986) and* Even the Fist Was Once an Open Palm with Fingers *(1991). In addition to the poetry for which he is best known, Amichai has written novels, short stories, plays, essays and reviews.*

He is a frequent visitor to the United States, and most of this interview was conducted in New York City, during the summer of 1989, at various cafés in Greenwich Village—the Triumph diner and Caffe Dante among them. All of the meetings took place in the early morning and were conducted in English, which Amichai speaks fluently in an accent that crosses German and Hebrew. Additional material was gleaned from correspondence exchanged during 1990, and a final session took place in New York in March of 1991, shortly after the Gulf War cease-fire.

In person, Amichai's amiability and charm mix with a subtle wryness, mental rigor and a gentle sense of irony and humor. He is handsome and compactly built, with dark eyes and the presence of a former athlete and soldier. The recurrent awareness of the physical in his poetry appears in person; frequently gesturing with his body and eyes he answered questions openly and without hesitation. He was completely at ease with the considerable background clatter of the cafés—in fact, he preferred it.

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INTERVIEWER

You were born in Germany, shortly after the First World War, part of a postwar generation.

YEHUDA AMICHAI

Yes, I was born in Germany in 1924. And I've always believed, as a general remark, that those born after World War I until, I would say, 1926, bear the weight of the twentieth century. We are the generation which inherited the aftermath of World War I and came of age during World War II. In my case, as an Israeli, I was still young enough, after World War II, to be actively involved in three additional wars. I really have the feeling that I am the result and very contents of the twentieth century.

INTERVIEWER

Had your family been in Germany for a long time?

AMICHAI

Yes. On both sides. My father was a German Jew, very Orthodox, a strong believer, in the best sense of the word. He was born in a Jewish farmhouse in the south of Germany, in a village, Giebelstadt; there must have been twenty to thirty thousand farmhouses like the one he was born in all over the south at that time. My father's was a family of farmers. So was my mother's family. They were also from the south, from a village which, today, would be about a two-hour drive a bit north from Giebelstadt. At the time, that was a great distance. My grandparents, and my great-great-great-great-grandparents all were born in Germany, reaching back, I think, to the Middle Ages. My father was the youngest of a family of seven children. Only one of them remained a farmer, one of his brothers. My father went to a town, Würzburg, and became a merchant. That's where I was born. Würzburg had a very strong Jewish community—two thousand or

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so, in a town of a hundred thousand inhabitants. But two thousand was quite a substantial Jewish community at that time. There was a Jewish hospital and a Jewish school—a state school Jews could go to. I learned Hebrew in first grade, to read and write Hebrew as well as German, which may explain why I had no trouble with Hebrew later on.

INTERVIEWER

Did your father fight in World War I?

AMICHAI

Yes, he did. So did my uncle, my mother's brother, who fell in 1916—I have a poem about that. It was strange for Jews who fought in World War I—Jewish people were divided among feuding nations. There were Jews fighting for Germany, for France, for Britain, for Russia, Jewish rabbis praying for the Allies, for the Turks, for the Germans and the Austrians. It was very much like the Druze in the Middle East—Israeli Druze fighting for Israel, Syrian Druze fighting for Syria against Israel.

INTERVIEWER

Do you come from a large family?

AMICHAI

I have a sister, who is older than I am. She lives in Israel. But I come from a large extended family. My family—the extended family—were all Orthodox. It was a very close-knit family which met for all sorts of occasions—weddings, bar mitzvahs. There was a strong, warm, very protected feeling among us. Also, my family—all the brothers and sisters of both my parents and their children, my cousins—moved to Palestine between 1933 and 1936, all of them. Some of them were settled

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into Palestine before the Nazis really took power. My family was, at the time, one of the few Jewish families from central Europe in Palestine. No one was killed in the coming Holocaust.

INTERVIEWER

Were you raised a Zionist?

AMICHAI

I was, but my family's Zionism wasn't ideological in any intellectual sense. It was the Zionism of religious orthodoxy, a practical Zionism—going to Palestine. For my parents, going to Palestine was typically romantic, motivated in part by their sense of Orthodoxy and in part by the longing to be in their own country. I had cousins who may have seen Zionism in utopian socialist terms, though my parents did not. There was, of course, zealous anti-Semitism before Hitler, which also had something to do with my family's going to Palestine. Some people think that anti-Semitism didn't really exist in Germany until 1933. I certainly don't want to take anything away from Hitler's guilt, but the anti-Semitism I grew up with predated Hitler. We were called names. We had stones thrown at us. And, yes, this created real sorrow. We defended ourselves as well as we could. Funny thing, the common name we were called was "Isaac"—the way Moslems are called "Ali" or "Mohammed." They'd call out, "Isaac, go back to Palestine, leave our home, go to your place." They threw stones at us and shouted, "Go to Palestine." Then, in Palestine, we were told to leave Palestine—history, juxtaposed, can be very ironic. But I do remember in 1933 when the Nazis came into power the anti-Semitism had been religiously based. Then it became political and economic. Before that the two hadn't merged—there was a kind of horrible limbo—but you could feel what was happening. I remember my parents telling me to keep away from the military

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parades, not to become mesmerized by the music and marching. I was also told—Würzburg was a very Catholic town—to keep away from the Catholic processions on certain feast days. All Saints' Day, I remember in particular. The processions were very somber, very German in a way, with students, priests and nuns carrying banners and holy icons and figures. Once—I was nine or ten—I was watching a Catholic procession, because I liked its colorfulness and pageantry. Since I was Orthodox, I was wearing a yarmulke. Suddenly, someone hit me in the face, and shouted, "You dirty little Jew, take your skullcap off!"

INTERVIEWER

How did your father make his living?

AMICHAI

My father was what you might call a middleman. He and his brother had a large store, and they sold merchandise to tailors and companies, but didn't sell retail. We were what you would call here upper middle class—quite well-off. My father never attended university—he apprenticed as a merchant, as was done in those days. But he was educated. He was well-read, and he enjoyed and appreciated music. He had a great sense of humor. He was well liked and had many non-Jewish friends who later tried to talk him out of leaving Germany for Palestine. My mother, too, read a lot. There was a great deal of culture in our home. Music and poetry—Goethe, Schiller, Heine. My mother and grandmother used to read to me from German literature.

INTERVIEWER

Would you characterize the environment you were brought up in as religious?

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AMICHAI

Very much so. I went to synagogue regularly. My first education was interpreting the Bible. But I also grew up with German folk songs and stories, which became as much a part of my imagination as the Bible stories. My sense of history came from these stories—I was fascinated with what you might call "fairy-tale–shaped history." But from the beginning, I felt I belonged to a different people, which wasn't any problem for me. I made the German landscape, which was very beautiful to me—flowing rivers, mountains, forests, lakes—into a biblical landscape. The valley of sunshine into which we went on school excursions in my imagination became the valley in which David and Goliath fought. Even though there was anti-Semitism, the German landscape was idyllic to me. This was mixed in with the dream of Palestine. I existed in a realm of dream, in the realm of the romantic, in a romantic dream of moving from a place where we were a small group, sometimes victimized, to a Jewish Palestine which had ancient roots in the Bible. Using the word *tribe* to describe us would be absolutely correct, I think. We didn't have our own tribe-like, private ways of dress like the gypsies did, for example, but what we possessed was deeper, it was inside us. We were so strong in our beliefs and dreams and imaginations, we felt we could live with the others because we were so deeply different. We didn't need to dress differently and we could work among them, because what we felt inside was so strong. I was a very religious child—I went to synagogue at least once, sometimes twice, a day. And I remember my religiousness as good—I think religion is good for children, especially educated children, because it allows for imagination, a whole imaginative world apart from the practical world. The world of religion isn't a logical world; that's why children like it. It's a world of worked-out fantasies, very similar to children's stories or fairy tales.

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INTERVIEWER

Do you remember having had a sense of the social and political realities in Germany while you were growing up?

AMICHAI

Not really. My parents were of a generation which didn't talk to their children about politics—they kept the children away from what was happening economically and politically. The men talked politics among themselves, but felt it was their role to keep the women and children away from politics. I never was aware of the depression in Germany, probably because my father was doing quite well, and because my grandparents, who were still alive, lived on farms, which I frequently visited. I don't recall feeling the economic reprecussions some Jews in the large cities must have felt.

INTERVIEWER

Were you an artistic child?

AMICHAI

No, I never really thought of myself in an artistic way. In my extended family there was no one even close to being an artist, being creative or performing. I think I was what you might call a normal child with a very rich inner world. I loved soccer and folktales. I never felt any sense of separation between an inner and outer world, and I don't feel it now. Real poets, I think, turn the outer world into the inner world and vice versa. Poets always have to be outside, in the world—a poet can't close himself in his studio. His workshop is in his head, and he has to be sensitive to words and how words apply to realities. It's a state of mind. A poet's state of mind is seeing the world with a kind of double exposure, seeing undertones and overtones, seeing the world as it is. Every intelligent person, whether he's an artist or not—a mathematician,

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a doctor, a scientist—possesses a poetic way of seeing and describing the world.

INTERVIEWER

At some point the decision was made to leave Germany for Palestine.

AMICHAI

It was after the rise of Hitler that my father decided to go to Palestine. My father had a good sense of history, and all of his brothers and sisters went too. The whole tribe, so to speak, came to Palestine between 1934 and 1936—my father's family, my mother's family, not one of them stayed. We were one of the few German Jewish families that were spared the Holocaust. I was aware of what was happening by then, but it was more like a distant thunder coming closer than a real threat. My father was very aware, although he tried not to let us feel what he saw and felt. So we went to Palestine when I was eleven, going on twelve, in 1936. Some of my older cousins went a year earlier—they joined kibbutzim. We moved to a small, very pleasant village not far from Tel Aviv called Petah Tiqwa. I remember the thrill of being able to walk barefoot through the citrus groves around the village. My father and his brother and one of my older cousins opened—they were among the first in all Palestine—a small factory in which they made sausages. It was actually a small house with a few machines. So, I know—firsthand—what goes into making sausages! My older cousin and my uncle actually made the sausages. My father handled the administrative side of the business; it was a business of two, three people . . .

INTERVIEWER

Did you have difficulty adjusting to life in Palestine?

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AMICHAI

No, not at all. I moved immediately into a Hebrew speaking culture and society. I had learned Hebrew at school in Germany and had no difficulty speaking and reading it in Palestine. We spoke German at home, but I became fluent in Hebrew. We also spoke and studied Hebrew at school. I spoke Hebrew all of the time except at home with my parents. My father knew Hebrew, but even so we spoke German to one another; it was a kind of family event. The school system was very different from the German-Jewish school I had attended, which was extremely disciplined, where there were ironclad rules that could never be broken. There was very little discipline in the school—it had the feeling of being in "the wild west." For example, some children came to school barefoot. The openness there was a revelation to me, and although I never really lost my sense of discipline, I didn't mind the sense of freedom, the wildness, at all.

INTERVIEWER

Did you experience any clashes with the Palestinian Arabs?

AMICHAI

Well, there were the Arab disturbances that started in 1936, with the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem—his dealings with Mussolini and Hitler. We could hear shooting at night—not a lot, but enough to remember it. And the elders of the family—my father, uncles, my older cousins—had to go on guard duty. And we were prohibited from going too far from the village—we couldn't go to Jaffa, for example, because it was too dangerous. But all this was natural to the way we lived, to our lives. No one was actually afraid; we just had to be careful, and all of us took care of one another. We defended ourselves, and that was that. I remember a practical joke my father played in 1936. He was a very serious man, my father—but he was also very funny, and a practical joker. In early

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1936, he went to Jaffa and bought himself Arab attire, *qunbaz,* and a big stick. And then he rode into Petah Tiqwa on a donkey one of my uncles had. No one recognized him, and he frightened everyone. He came to our house and frightened all of us with that stick. I remember this well. I remember my father's sense of humor, even in times of unrest—it's something I've inherited from him. He used to act it out because he wasn't verbal, as I am. But I think that much of me is rooted in my father's juxtaposed sensitivities, his sense of humor and his seriousness.

INTERVIEWER

You eventually moved to Jerusalem.

AMICHAI

In 1937. I think it was partly because my parents wanted us to get a better education—there were very good schools in Jerusalem. My father had also wanted to buy a large piece of land, which he wasn't able to do, so he decided to move to Jerusalem. He had just inherited some money, too—so we were quite well off at that time. Two or three years later my father started a couple of businesses; basically, we never lacked money. We went to good schools, which were quite expensive. We grew up, I think, like the Lebanese in Beirut: moving among our own people—mostly German Jews—of which there must have been over three thousand at that time in Jerusalem. We didn't have any real contact with Arabs, and we didn't have any sense of being victims although there had been riots, disturbances. We had our government under the British mandate, and the Arabs had theirs.

INTERVIEWER

So you had become more aware of political realities by then?

AMICHAI

Yes, by this time I had become quite aware of political realities. This was right before World War II, and there

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were more and more Jews coming to Palestine, more and more from Germany and other parts of Europe. And the Arab Palestinians actually aligned themselves with the Axis powers. I have a poem about going with my father once a week to the Wailing Wall, but between 1937 and 1939 Jews couldn't go there through the Arab quarter—you had to go through the Armenian quarter or have stones thrown at you. The same stones that are being thrown today. Throwing stones wasn't invented yesterday. I remember, in 1939, my parents listening to reports on the radio about the German invasion of Poland. I remember it still, exactly. My mother and father were listening—it was the first of September, 1939—and I remember they turned pale, as if they realized . . . I'm sure they didn't imagine the Holocaust, but they sensed that this war would be unbearably terrible. I was fifteen. But, I must tell you, I didn't have the same sense they had. To me it was terrible, of course, but at the same time I felt something momentous was going to happen. I sensed that war would change my life.

INTERVIEWER

Did your increasing political awareness affect your religious sensibility?

AMICHAI

Yes, very much so. I stopped believing in God at that time, and stopped practicing religion. My father was very hurt. I think my reaction to religion was, so to speak, in the air. It was the beginning of the Socialist movement in Palestine, which was in part a reaction to certain Orthodox Jews—my father wasn't among them—who rejected Zionism. And most of the pioneer Zionists who had come from kibbutzim—most of them from very Orthodox families like mine—had broken from religion. Zionism had become a kind of revolution against traditional Jewish Orthodoxy. There were two ways of rebel-

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ling against it: one was to become a Communist, a Bolshevik, as in Soviet Russia; the other was to become a Zionist. At that time I chose—not in any thought-out, formalized way—the latter. I didn't think much about socialism and communism until much later, until after World War II, when I became involved with the left.

INTERVIEWER

So you were an adolescent when war broke out in Europe in 1939.

AMICHAI

Yes, I was fifteen. I finished high school in 1942. But, during those years, Jerusalem was, strangely, politically peaceful. In 1939, there were still Arab riots, but not like in 1936, when the British more or less tolerated the rioting against Jews. The British quashed the uprising in one week, destroying a few Arab villages, moving the people off the land. That was the end of it. Why the change? Because the war had broken out, the British needed Jewish soldiers—they didn't want colonial problems. But by 1941 real anxiety had come into our lives—the Germans were advancing into Russia, to Stalingrad, and an anti-British, pro-Fascist government was in power in Iraq. The situation was extremely tense. At the same time the German army was advancing through northern Africa. I remember being terribly worried, because we all knew what would happen if the Germans entered Palestine. There wasn't much of the British army left in Palestine, either. So, at that time, in 1941, a lot of young Jewish men in Palestine volunteered for the British army, as members of a brigade, actually. In 1942, after high school, I volunteered too. I became a soldier in the Palestine brigade of the British army. Written across the shoulder of my uniform was the word *Palestine.* But, I should say, although I felt anxiety, it wasn't the anxiety that my parents' generation had—they had a different sense of what was happening. It didn't penetrate as

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deeply with me. I had a sense not uncommon for young men who come of age during war—war put off having to make a lot of decisions. I was relieved, in a way, not having to decide what to do, where to work, and so on: I was going to war, and I didn't know how it was going to end, and that was that. My motivation was to do what I had to do, to do what was right—which was very much determined by my parents' fears, and the necessity of protecting my family and my people. This is what took over in me. And 1942 was a turning point in my life for another, quite important reason—it was the time of my first love affair. So, my first war and my first love affair coincided.

INTERVIEWER

Up until this time—you were eighteen—had you written, or thought about writing, poetry?

AMICHAI

It never entered my mind to write poetry, at least not in any formal sense. I wrote some in diaries, which are lost, and I read a lot. I wrote poems for the girl I was in love with. But that was it—and these were private.

INTERVIEWER

So you fought in the Second World War . . .

AMICHAI

Yes. During 1942 and 1943 we were stationed in Palestine, along the coast—you have to remember in 1942 there was still a fear of a German invasion of Palestine. We were stationed along the coast for almost a year. First I was in an infantry unit but then was switched to doing maps in the Royal Engineers. In 1943, we were moved to Egypt. We were in Egypt for two years. We moved all over Egypt. I knew Arabic—from school, and learned more. I became deeply involved with Egypt, its landscapes, its colors. A friend of mine in my unit was an expert on Egyptian antiques, and we went on excursions

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into places which were very remote and totally unexplored and undisturbed, not like now. We saw no military action there, and I met a lot of Egyptians and made many friends, especially in Cairo. But I mostly hung out with our people, because we had a lot to do: Between 1944 and 1946 we did a lot of underground work—smuggling arms and Jewish immigrants into what was then Palestine. We began preparing, on a small scale, for a Jewish state—we were actually preparing for a new conflict while the one we were in was fading away. One event in Egypt had an extremely important impact on my life. It was in 1944, I think, we were somewhere out in the Egyptian desert. The British had these mobile libraries for their soldiers, but, of course, most of the British soldiers, being from the lower classes and pretty much uneducated, didn't make much use of the libraries. It was mostly us Palestinians who used them—there we were, Jews reading English books while the English didn't. There had been some kind of storm, and one of the mobile libraries had overturned into the sand, ruining or half-ruining most of the books. We came upon it, and I started digging through the books, and came upon a book, a Faber anthology of modern British poetry, which I think came out in the late thirties. Hopkins was the first poet, Dylan Thomas the last. It was my first encounter with modern British poetry—the first time I read Eliot and Auden, for example, who became very important to me. I discovered them in the Egyptian desert, in a half-ruined book. This book had an enormous impact on me—I think that was when I began to think seriously about writing poetry.

INTERVIEWER

What did you do after the war?

AMICHAI

I was twenty-two, in 1946, when I was released from the army. I went back to Jerusalem and had to make a decision about how to make a living. There were courses

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offered through the Jewish shadow government, financed by the British for ex-servicemen. So, I went to school for a year, a year of intensive courses, to become a teacher of small children. This was a good time. I was very active in politics during this time, too—more on the left, the socialist Zionist movement, the Haganah, which was the defense group of the Jews who wanted a Jewish state in Palestine, who were dealing with the British. This was very mainstream, though. There were two groups on the extreme right, one of them Begin's. But Begin was an outsider then, he was nothing—I still think he's an outsider. There was also a Palestinian Communist party, which was monstrous. The Haganah was the mainstream. Again, the feeling was to do what was right. The main principle of the movement was never to retaliate, no vengeance, which I think helped us win—the main principle was *hold back.* I started teaching in 1947, but after about two months I volunteered for one of the Haganah commando units. The shadow government authorities encouraged teachers not to volunteer—there were hardly any teachers. But I joined anyway, a commando unit, which was called the Palmah, which actually means "crack unit." We were at war. My unit fought in the south of Palestine, which is mostly desert. At the time there were twelve Jewish settlements there, which we had to defend against the whole Egyptian army. I will never forget it. It was a terribly exhausting, draining, but remarkable experience. We were young, Socialists, Zionists, and we believed in a new and better world. We were like guerrillas—we had small arms only, and we were up against well-armed troops. I commanded ten people—a small infantry unit, a crack infantry unit. There were about two thousand of us, along with several hundred people from the nearby kibbutzim, against some twenty thousand Egyptians on the other side. Almost every night we went out in small groups, creating skirmishes, so that the Egyptians would believe there were larger operations than there were. But we really had nothing. I also don't think the Egyptian army was very motivated—remember

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they were fighting in a foreign country and were afraid, I think, to wander out in unknown territories, where terrible things might happen to them. The Egyptian officers were also totally trained by the British and operated according to British military principles—artillery barrage and attack, artillery barrage and attack. The artillery barrages leveled some kibbutzim right down into the earth. After that, their command thought that nothing would happen. But we were holed up in bunkers—we were more like guerrillas, remember—so that when they broke through we were alive and shooting. But the price we paid in killed and wounded was very high. One thing I've never forgotten happened during the last days of the fighting, when our unit caused the Egyptian army to retreat into the Sinai peninsula. We came to an Egyptian detention camp, where Egyptian liberals and Socialists and Communists were imprisoned by King Farouk. We actually liberated the camp, and we all embraced one another, all of us part of what we felt to be a new world, the breakdown of monarchy and imperialism. It was extremely moving. I've never forgotten it. It isn't surprising that the Egyptians were the first to make peace with us—the heaviest fighting in 1948 involved the Egyptians. The Syrians and Iraqis sent armies in, but without any real conviction. The Jordanians invaded Palestine to get part of it as their state, which actually was the land allocated to the Palestinian state. I don't think the Egyptians fought to get any land or power—they fought out of conviction. It's no coincidence that those who overthrew the King—Nasser, even Naguib and others—had been young officers in the Egyptian army that invaded Palestine.

INTERVIEWER

When did you start seriously writing poetry?

AMICHAI

I remained in the army until the end of 1949. I then went back to Jerusalem and started teaching again. I also

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took courses at Hebrew University, studying the Bible and literature. And, around then, I began seriously writing poetry. Until then I'd never thought of writing as any kind of occupation, because I wasn't certain exactly what I'd be doing. I was in the army. I saw writing primarily as a way of keeping some personal thoughts. I never wrote during battles, but sometimes between battles I wrote out what were almost small testaments, small legacies, last wills, objects of feeling I could keep and carry with me. What I wrote then wasn't for others yet. I also wondered why, as long as other writers were able to represent what I was thinking and feeling, I should bother to try. But, in the late forties, there came a point in time when I started thinking, "Why don't I do this myself?" The writing I was reading didn't represent my needs, what I saw and what I felt. I was about twenty-five. I began to write poems in the early fifties. I was attending Hebrew University. Because of the war, my whole generation began university studies when we were in our mid-twenties. I took courses while I was teaching schoolchildren.

INTERVIEWER

Were you in touch with other writers?

AMICHAI

In 1951—I was twenty-seven—I showed one of my literature teachers, Professor Halkin, poems of mine. He sent one of them out to one of the magazines, and it was accepted. Then there was a contest sponsored by the student newspaper, a monthly, which published very uneven writing. I submitted a poem for the contest, and won the first prize. I was part of a group of young writers, but most of the group lived in Tel Aviv. Jerusalem, then as now, was pretty much isolated from any vivid intellectual, literary scene—Tel Aviv was, and still is, the place for publishing houses, cafés, theaters, writers' groups and so on. A few people in Tel Aviv

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began publishing poems—actually a group of four or five. One of them, Benjamin Harshav, now is a professor at Yale. David Avidan, Nathan Zach and, later, Dahlia Ravikovitch were also among the group. I was older than the others because the poets my age had been seriously writing longer than I—the others were all in their late teens, early twenties. No publisher would publish us, so we published our own little magazine and published ourselves. My first book, in fact, which came out in 1955, was published by this magazine press, which meant it was published with my money. The publishing houses were only publishing the great old men of modern Hebrew literature, like Bialik and Tchernikhovsky, and extremely popular poets, like Alterman and Shlonsky and Greenberg, all of whom, I'd say, wrote under the influence of Russian, German and French poetry.

INTERVIEWER

Your generation was in the remarkable position of molding your language. Was there a lot of talk about what could be done with modern Hebrew?

AMICHAI

There was, but I didn't take too much part in it, because I wrote for my own needs. My thinking was, why not use the language I talk in, as well as the language of my Orthodox background, the prayers, the Bible, together, juxtaposing and blending them. I discovered that this was my language. It was, I think, due to my unique personal background—I'd been raised in a very Orthodox home, and the language of the prayers and the Bible were part of my natural language. I juxtaposed this language against the modern Hebrew language, which suddenly had to become an everyday language after having been a language of prayers and synagogue for two thousand years. This was very natural for me—there was nothing programmatic about it. This kind of mixed sensi-

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bility or imagination of the language was my natural way to write poems.

INTERVIEWER

Were there European and American influences?

AMICHAI

Yes. I was also influenced by English and German modernists, Auden, Eliot, Else Lasker-Schüler, and at a certain point, Rilke. I felt that what they could do with their language, I could do with Hebrew. Like the others in my group, I rejected the aesthetics of writers like Alterman, Greenberg, Shlonsky, who wrote with a pathos very much influenced by Mayakovsky and Blok and the French poets. I also rejected the typically romantic Socialist and Communist pathos that was popular at the time, which was influenced by poets like Eluard. I found a certain falseness in the music, in the rhetoric, in the "bread and wine" images of the simple peasant or the common man with a fist raised to communism—I felt it was a false pathos. There was, of course, a long tradition of Hebrew poetry, but what we were experiencing was a free-fall into modernism at exactly the same time a Jewish state had begun. It was more than a turning point in the Hebrew language—it was a time of radical change. In addition to the languages of the Bible and prayers, I also studied and learned and used in my poetry the Hebrew poetry of the Middle Ages—both its forms and its language. The Hebrew poets were greatly influenced by Arabic poetry, in southern Spain especially, during a "golden age" when Jewish and Arab cultures openly mixed.

INTERVIEWER

What was the response to your first book?

AMICHAI

It was mostly attacked. One newspaper, in fact, attacked a young critic who had praised it. My style, my

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technique, outraged most critics—I was attacked for using colloquial language, attacked for trying techniques no one had ever tried before. But, after a year or so, within two years, I was suddenly being talked about, I was very much "in." My second book, which came out in 1958, almost immediately sold four thousand copies, which, in a country the size of Israel, made it a kind of "best-seller." I was thirty-four, but my readers were from all age groups—they always have been. The book was published by a house associated with a kibbutz, very left-wing at the time. I brought my third book of poems to the same house—but they chose not to publish it, although my book with them had been a best-seller and they said they liked the poems very much. Why? "Because we have already published a book by you"—that was socialism. I had my share, now someone else gets theirs. So I went with another publisher, Schocken, who still is my publisher—actually they came to me. I think it's one of the oldest publishing houses in Israel, very small, but very good. It originally was a German house—the first Israeli publisher of Kafka and Agnon—in the great tradition of small literary houses, drawing its writers from connections within the house. My third book of poems came out in 1962. Half of it included the first two books, the other half was new poems. It was actually my first collected work, 1948 to 1962. There must be five hundred poems in the book, which is still in print and still sells very well—over fifty thousand copies have been sold.

INTERVIEWER

You've also written essays and stories.

AMICHAI

Yes. In the mid-fifties, after a trip to the United States with my first wife, I wrote two small essays, impressions of sorts. One was entitled "Auden Reads His Poetry at the Y," which has to do with my impressions after hearing Auden read in New York City at the Poetry Center

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of the 92nd Street YM-YWHA, and meeting him very briefly after the reading. Then, in the mid-sixties we met again, and became friends. I also became very interested in Dylan Thomas. His poetry didn't really influence mine, but I loved his poems. So, on our return to Israel from the United States, we passed through Wales, and I visited the place where Dylan Thomas had lived in southern Wales. I visited his mother and the cottage where he had worked—you wouldn't have believed it. The cottage was open, there were manuscripts lying right on the floor, no one had taken care of them. I was too naive to have done anything about it. I talked with his mother, a very moving experience. When I returned to Israel, I wrote an essay on visiting the birthplace of Dylan Thomas for one of the newspapers, and one of the editors said, "Why don't you write short stories?" I then started writing short stories, along with poems. In 1959, I published a book of short stories. About this time I also started writing my first novel, which was six hundred pages in Hebrew; that would be about eight hundred pages in English. It came out in 1962, at the same time as my third book of poems. Harper & Row published the novel in the United States in the early sixties—it was, in fact, the first book of mine to be published in English. But I had to cut the book almost in half for the translation—it was probably too expensive to translate the whole thing at that time.

INTERVIEWER

The sheer output of work during this time is remarkable. Had you stopped teaching and committed yourself to writing full time?

AMICHAI

Not at all. I was doing all of this writing while I was teaching—during the fifties, after I received my B.A. from Hebrew University, I had a full-time job teaching small children. Anyone who has taught small children

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knows what kind of work it involves. I taught the "problem" children, the tough ones, the children no one else wanted to teach. I actually was very good at it, I seemed to have been able to help these children, but the work was exhausting. I really don't know how I wrote poetry, short stories and my novel all at the same time, I really don't know how I did it.

INTERVIEWER

When did your work first begin to appear in English translations?

AMICHAI

In the early sixties. Two Israeli poets, Dennis Silk and Harold Schimmel began, very successfully and quite wonderfully, translating some of my poems into English in Israeli magazines. A few people at Hebrew University began translating me too. In the mid-sixties, in England, Ted Hughes and Daniel Weissbort, while looking for poems to publish in their first issue of *Modern Poetry in Translation,* came upon one of these magazines, where there were two or three poems of mine. They contacted me, and included my poems in the first issue of *Modern Poetry in Translation,* in 1964, along with poets such as Popa, Herbert, Voznesensky. The magazine received a lot of attention in England, because of the energies of Ted Hughes and Daniel Weissbort. It was, really, Ted Hughes who put me into orbit. Through him, in 1966, I was invited by Gian Carlo Menotti to take part in the Spoleto international art festival. It was the most fashionable international festival of the time—theater, music, the best of the international avant-garde. So my international debut, after *Modern Poetry in Translation,* was at Spoleto, where I read with Auden, Ezra Pound, Allen Ginsberg, Ungaretti, Zbigniew Herbert, Hughes and others. And then a year later I was invited again to Spoleto and also to one of the great international poetry festivals, the festival put together by Ted Hughes and

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others, in London. It was very grandiose—there was a lot of money around—and included Octavio Paz, Auden, Pound, Robert Graves, Alberti, Voznesensky and Neruda. So, quite suddenly, I found myself meeting and reading with poets whom I had admired for years.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have many writer friends?

AMICHAI

I live in Jerusalem which, compared to Tel Aviv, is not very artistic at all. Tel Aviv is a very vivid city, very alive, and most of the action in literature, theater, journalism, publishing, painting, photography, cinema, is in Tel Aviv. Jerusalem is a closed environment, there is very little artistic activity, which is why I like living there. I keep very much to myself there, as everyone does—I don't hang out in any literary cafés because there really aren't any. I think it's natural for poets to become friends, but I also think, after a certain time, it's very difficult for poets to keep a friendship alive—for example, I've always felt that if two poets marry, the marriage has to be almost impossible. No, personally, I don't think poets have real friendships with poets who write in their language or in their region. I don't think so. I grew up with this notion—I think it was nurtured by the mythic romanticist relationship between Keats and Shelley, Wordsworth and Coleridge—that poets became the closest friends. For me, though, friendships with poets are difficult, because poets have large egos, and are quite envious. I don't think I have one friend writing in Hebrew who is a poet whom I count among my very closest, best friends. I think writers, especially writers in the same language, are actually more colleagues than friends—like surgeons among surgeons. It's, at best, a professional relationship, but one potentially wrought with enmity. It's best to avoid this, to stay away from it. My close writer friends—like Ted Hughes—also are, tempera-

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mentally, very much on their own. Hughes has never needed the London literary, artistic scene, and I'm certain there are a lot of people who don't like him out of envy, or other reasons. I have other very good friends who write in other languages with whom I have really good times—Christoph Meckel of Germany, Stanley Moss and Philip Schultz here, for example. My closest friends in Israel are mostly people involved with science—a geologist, a biologist—probably because I have great respect and love for the physical sciences.

INTERVIEWER

Let's talk about your poetry, your thoughts about it. Do you have any primary imaginative concerns when you write a poem?

AMICHAI

The most important dimension in writing for me is time. Time is entirely relative, relational. The phrase I like to use to describe my sense of time—a play on *comparative literature*—is *comparative time*. Time, for me, is imaginatively comparative and continuous; I have an almost physical sense of memory recall. I can pick up any point in my life and be almost physically right there, but in an emotional sense. It's easy for me to shortcut back to my childhood, my adolescence, my wars. It's actually a very Jewish sense of time, out of the Talmud. There's a Talmudic saying that "there's nothing early or late in the Bible," which means that everything, all events, are ever present, that the past and future converge on the present, especially in language. This is also true for Arab culture and the Arabic language. In Hebrew, unlike English or German or even the Latinate Romance languages, there aren't complex tense and mood structures, all of the structures I had so much trouble learning in school, such as the future present, the future past, the pluperfect. Structures such as "I should have been" or "What will you have done tomorrow?" In Hebrew, and

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in Arabic, most tenses revolve around the present—you can change easily from present tense to past tense, or from present tense to future tense. There seems at times almost to be no difference and, as often happens in the Biblical texts, the future tense is used to describe something that happened in the past. This sense of bringing the past and future into the present defines my sense of time—it is very strong within me and my poetry.

INTERVIEWER

Your poetry is also infused with an acute historical consciousness, which is both public and personal.

AMICHAI

Yes. Events are very, very important to me. I see events—images, memories—almost physically, like small plaques, icons, objects, each with its own descriptions, depictions, its own codes. And each of these, wherever it took place, is imaginatively imposed, layered, beside or on another. So, if I am writing a poem in the Caffe Dante in New York—and I've written several here during my stays in New York—I am also, simultaneously, writing about other places, other times. "In the Caffe Dante, in New York, thinking of New York all around me, thinking about you in the orange orchard near Tel Aviv, where I kissed you twenty years ago"—that's the way, spatially and temporally, I think through poems. And my sense of time is also linked to my sense of history. I think this is true for everyone; I think it's especially true for Jews, whose sense of history has literally helped keep them alive. I try to create a kind of equality between my personal history and the history around me, because historical events often occur during times which are metaphorically concentrated. For instance, if I were to say that I remember my father during Passover, 1940, sitting at the table listening to this and that, by mentioning Passover I bring into play the whole history of the journey of Israel out of Egypt as well as a particular celebration

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of Passover in a particular place at a particular time. Whole histories can be included in the language, by collapsing content and language itself—for example, I can shift into a biblical Hebrew to describe the particular, personal Passover memory, which then takes on different historical meanings. This provides me with enormous temporal and spatial range within the language itself. But there is also a side of me that hates history—my political, humanist side. So much of history, my individual and my collective history, has involved war, and I hate war. So I hate history. I've experienced, and my generation has experienced, great and grievous historical disappointments. I say this not only with irony, but with a stronger feeling. My generation—many of whom, myself included, were idealistically very left-wing—didn't need Gorbachev to explain to us the violence of a certain kind of historical thinking; I remember when the truth about Stalin came out. I've also seen the violence of right-wing thinking. I've often said that I consider myself a "post-cynical humanist." Maybe now, after so much horror, so many shattered ideals, we can start anew—now that we're well armored for disappointment. I think my sense of history and God, even if I am against history and God, is very Jewish. I think this is why my poems are sometimes taught in religious schools. It's an ancient Jewish idea to fight with God, to scream out against God.

INTERVIEWER

In a highly politicized society, in a highly politicized part of the world, what are your politics?

AMICHAI

Because, as a child, I kept away, and was kept away by my parents, from politics, I've never been attracted to ideology or ideological thinking. I always had this deep sense that I had my world, and there was the world outside me, and that I had to come to terms with it, even if it wasn't always good. But I preserved my own inner

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world, which I was fully aware of at a very early age. This didn't prevent me from becoming quite leftist in later years, but those politics were always primarily based on individual, not "party," politics. I have never joined a political party. I think I inherited this sensibility from my father who, although he was very religious, never joined a religious party. He was always suspicious of anyone, even rabbis, who made their living from ideologies. I inherited his skepticism of ideologies. He believed religion to be very private, very individual. So, personally, I believe that when someone becomes a functionary for an ideal—don't get me wrong, a society has to have such persons, I'm not an anarchist—he becomes a commissar of sorts, and necessarily loses the sense of his ideal. So I've always been suspicious of, and kept away from, joining official political parties, although I've frequently been asked to join. I've always refused. My politics are very much rooted in a humanist context. My politics were not based as such on Marxist theory, but rather on a principle of maximum justice and equality among people. Of course I was always aware that people are not born with equal talents and capacities, but I believed that a social system had to maximize opportunities and freedoms for all human beings.

INTERVIEWER

Are you frequently asked to comment on political events?

AMICHAI

Yes, there are demands on me, as a writer, to make political statements. And I sometimes do, with other writer colleagues, through statements in newspapers. I've also written a few poems that are very politically direct, in response to particular political events, which I don't put in my books because, actually, I consider them more to be placards than poems. I've always publicly spoken out for peace, but I'm fully aware that what writ-

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ers feel about peace doesn't matter all that much. Often it's a case of writers wanting to believe they have more power than they do or, worse, writers feeling good about themselves because they announce themselves as anti- or pro- something. But I've never wanted to be the kind of intellectual who becomes involved in a political party, as Günter Grass did with the Social Democrats in Germany. I've always been fully aware that if you enter into politics at a certain point you have to make deals with nasty people. Because politics involves money, politics is a dirty business—you have to get dirty. I've never cared for the role of playing the pure prophet within organized political contexts.

INTERVIEWER

Are you a pacifist?

AMICHAI

I am, generally—but my pacifism isn't extreme or absolute. An absolute pacifist would not have fought for the creation of a state, nor fought to protect it. I've always seen this type of pacifism in terms of the Nazis—to me, it leads, at some point, to acquiescence to evil. But I resolutely believe in the principle of nonviolence. I believe one must do the utmost to avoid violence. One must do everything one can to prevent wars. We should find ways to prevent further wars. That seems to me the crucial thing. I've lived through so many betrayals of romantic political ideals—the main thing, I believe now, is to do as much as possible to prevent war.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel isolated by your position?

AMICHAI

My position isn't an isolated one, not at all. It's a position defined and politically recognized in Israel in terms of secular humanism. To be a secular humanist in Israeli

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society really means something politically. But, I must emphasize, I know the space I live in isn't empty—there are other sides. I'm not like so many western thinkers who somehow exonerate violence by Asians and Africans because Asian and African states are "third world" and, therefore, subject to lower moral standards when it comes to violence. I think this kind of thinking is racist. I have never felt anything racial toward Arabs, but certain Arabs and Arab states are part of a long and terrible tradition against Jews, especially fundamentalist Moslems. I am fully aware of this; I have no illusions about it. But that's why I think we can talk with Arabs—those Arabs who are under the same threats of violence from Moslem fundamentalists as we are. I very much fear the disintegration of a society into violence, when those who are committed to violence on ideological or racial grounds begin to take over a society. This happens not only in the Middle East, but all over the world. I am afraid of people who speak in absolutes, in the name of right ideas, no matter who they are.

INTERVIEWER

What is the relationship between your politics and your poetry?

AMICHAI

First of all, whoever reads my poetry could never arrive at fundamentalist, absolutist thinking. If someone is attracted to my poetry, he or she is attracted to all of the metaphoric background that I throw up against violence. Dealing with political realities is part of what we need to do to survive as normal human beings. You have to acknowledge political realties as they are. There's an old Jewish saying, "If you meet the devil, take him with you into the synagogue." Try to take the evil of politics into yourself, to influence it imaginatively—to give it human shape. This is my attitude toward politics. I've often said that all poetry is political. This is because real poems deal

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with a human response to reality, and politics is part of reality, history in the making. Even if a poet writes about sitting in a glass house drinking tea, it reflects politics.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think your sense of the relationship between poetry and politics—your sense of engagement—is rooted in your identity as an Israeli?

AMICHAI

Yes. In fact, some people, some poets, whom I meet from all over the world, envy my political realities. This has nothing to do with Israel's particular politics, but rather with an envy of my situation—I can be a deeply involved, engaged writer because I don't have to seek engagement. I am politically engaged because everyone in Israel—on the right or left—exists under political pressures and existential tensions. And it's true—I am incapable of thinking how anyone cannot be politically engaged. Politics is history in the making. I have always felt part of it, part of its large process. I have tried to incorporate this feeling into my poetry from its beginnings. I am, in a way, like the state of Israel—I have a poem which says, "When I was young, the country was young." I was in Israel before the creation of the state, and I've taken part in its wars, and I am still alive after it all, conscious of what has happened and what is happening now. From 1935, 1940—my last fifty to fifty-five years of history are comparable to over two hundred years of history in the United States. Two hundred years of wars, changes, immigrations, generations, condensed into one lifetime. This is the kind of pressure I've written within. I've often asked myself if it hadn't been for all this pressure—if I had grown up in America, for example—whether I'd be writing poems at all. My personal history has coincided with a larger history. For me it's always been one and the same.

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INTERVIEWER

Do you ever find all of this exhausting? Do you resent that your life has been politicized?

AMICHAI

No, not at all. As a poet, I don't get exhausted by all of the political pressure, the political realities, because I experience it all without any self-conscious awareness of myself. I don't think of myself as a poet, that's why I can write poetry about my experiences. I didn't volunteer for the Jewish brigade, or fight in our war in a tough commando unit, self-consciously as a poet. I've never said, "You're a poet, you have to become a soldier or become a criminal in order to experience life." I've always had enough life to experience. I did what I did because it was the right thing to do, and because I had to. My preoccupation was sorting out love and war. I was like someone walking on the street who stumbles over a rock—he can either fall or take quick steps to break the impact of the fall. Poetry was like taking quick steps to break the fall. My mind was on love while history was full of constant danger, the news of murder, news of Holocaust. This is what I put into my poems. When the peace treaty with Egypt was signed an American journalist asked me what would I write about now, since my poetry dealt so much with war. I answered him that if the only sacrifice for peace would be my poetry, I would gladly stop writing. But, of course, there hasn't been peace and, anyway, there would be enough political and private pressures in my life to create poetry. Contrary to those who believe history is at its end, I don't believe so.

INTERVIEWER

What are your feelings about a Palestinian state?

AMICHAI

Politically, I ally myself with those who believe in territorial compromise, the creation of a Palestinian state which would be confederated with Jordan. I believe,

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after forty years of being at the top of the hit lists of most Arab countries, Israel has the right to be very cautious. But I also believe we shouldn't be in the territories. Although we didn't invade the people living there—they were conquered after we were attacked in 1967—we shouldn't rule people who don't want us ruling them. I don't think Israelis should rule Arabs who do not want to be ruled by Israelis. No matter what justifications may be advanced, I think it's wrong. This position is neither left nor right—it's more moral, I think, than political. I am, of course, deeply concerned about what has happened, and is happening, in Lebanon and in Syria and Iraq, and unlike many liberals in the West I don't exonerate violence because it's committed by Africans, Asians, Indians. I am not, and never have been, prejudiced against Arabs. I don't see the issues with Arabs as racial, any more than the wars between England and Germany were racial. We are enemies, and we are enemies for reasons. Racism isn't one of them—certainly not a valid one. And, of course, Arabs in the territories, even Israeli Arabs, are really in the worst of it. You could compare their situation to what Japanese in California during World War II went through, when the Japanese were put into camps. Arabs in Israel must have multiple loyalties—and I don't blame them, not at all. All of this just compels the need for some kind of compromise, with Arabs in Israel playing a vital role, since they know the conflicts of both worlds. But the conflicts can't be settled only by Arab Palestinians who want peace. Remember that we are in a state of war with Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Libya. Therefore it's a process that must be cautiously pursued.

INTERVIEWER

Has the Gulf War affected your thinking?

AMICHAI

The Gulf crisis has not basically changed my attitude toward the possibility of some dialogue between Arab states and Palestinians and Israel. However, the war has

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made me more suspicious about the PLO's real targets: they were ready to ally themselves with those who promised to "burn" Israel, just as Palestinians in the past allied themselves with Hitler and Mussolini and later with Nasser of Egypt.

INTERVIEWER

Back, more specifically, to your poetic strategies. Your poems contain a sense of constant motion, in and out of different realms of experience and reality. Is this a central tenet of your aesthetic?

AMICHAI

Yes. As a poet I've always thought of myself as a kind of traveler—I expressed this feeling directly in my long poem, "Travels of a Latter Day Benjamin of Tudela." The first Benjamin of Tudela was the great medieval Jewish traveler, who, during the second half of the twelfth century, traveled throughout the Levant and the Middle East to find the lost Jewish tribes, traveling all through the Middle East, even to Yemen. The second was created by the Yiddish and Hebrew writer Mendele Mokher Seforim. Benjamin II was a comic, Don Quixote-ish simpleton who set out for the Holy Land. I think when you're a poet you have to forget you're a poet—a real poet doesn't draw attention to the fact he's a poet. The reason a poet is a poet is to write poems, not to advertise himself as a poet.

INTERVIEWER

Yet, for all of the seriousness of your subject matter, you're a poet of profound irony. How does irony fit into the picture?

AMICHAI

Irony is integral to my poetry. Irony is, for me, a kind of cleaning material. I inherited a sense of humor and irony from my father, who always used humor and irony

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as a way of clarifying, clearing, cleaning the world around him. Irony is a way of focusing, unfocusing and focusing again—always trying to see another side. That's the way I see, that's the way I think and feel, that's the way I live—focusing, refocusing and juxtaposing different shifting and changing perspectives.

INTERVIEWER

You know Israeli-Arab and Palestinian poets and have translated their poetry. Do you see similarities between their poetries and Hebrew poetry?

AMICHAI

Basically, yes. I think that Israeli-Arab and Palestinian poets are trying to do the same things within their traditions that Israeli poets are trying to do within theirs. In a way, we are working on common ground—not only literally, within the same reality, the same landscape, but also on common spiritual ground, as poets. It's mainly been Palestinian poetry that's interested me. Poets such as Mahmoud Darwish, Samih Al-Qasim, powerful, strong poets who mix traditional and modern forms and techniques and language with political subject matter. Mahmoud Darwish and I have read together at several international events. And, although I don't accept much of his role as a political figure in the PLO, I greatly respect and admire him as a poet. As far as I know he thinks the same of me; I'm sure he doesn't agree with much of my politics, although I'm not outspoken politically. I'm more of a moralist poet who deals with political realities than a poet who writes out of a political context. But I have no illusions. It's quite difficult for poets to communicate with one another in a society that is politically torn apart the way that ours is. I have a doctor friend who tells me it's the same with doctors. When, for example, he meets Syrian doctors at international meetings, everything is cordial and collegial on the level of being doctors. But this is a kind of illusion, because ultimately

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politics intrudes. At some point the Israeli and the Syrian have to return to the political realities of their own countries, and whatever exchanges were made become transitory. This is true for Arabic and Hebrew poets, for Jewish and Arab doctors and teachers. The exchanges on professional levels help, but on political levels—in terms of real political effects—the results are illusory.

INTERVIEWER

Do you read much poetry?

AMICHAI

I mostly read poetry, a lot of poetry, and every now and then a novel or book of stories. When I was younger I used to read a lot more fiction. I also read newspapers and magazines. Some of the newspapers in Israel are quite good, with excellent sections on cultural and political commentary.

INTERVIEWER

Do you read critical theory? Philosophy? Theology?

AMICHAI

No, I never have. I wouldn't tell a young writer not to read theory, but I've never felt I could do much with it.

INTERVIEWER

You've been translated into numerous languages—quite extensively into English. How do you feel about your work in translation?

AMICHAI

I am, really, quite at ease with it all. I've visited the United States four times to teach writing, and I am invited to read all over the United States. I read from translations when I read, but I always make a point of reading at least two or three of the translated poems in

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Hebrew. The poems I read in translation, interestingly, move away from me, away from being my own. Sometimes I feel a kind of surprise when I read them, like listening to my voice on a tape recorder—at first you don't know whether it's your voice. Sometimes the poem completely separates, and becomes a poem in English, which I hear as a poem in English that works on its own, as if it were a poem by someone else. I am not one who constantly laments what's been lost in the translation of his poems. First of all, if I believed too much would be lost if a poem were to be translated, I wouldn't have it translated. I think it's a bit hypocritical for poets to say poetry can't be translated. It can, of course—just not all of it. But my translators have carefully chosen those poems that can be best translated. I have rhymed and metered poems, deeply based in complicated layers of the Hebrew language, which haven't been translated. If something gets lost in a translation, something gets lost. But much is gained also.

INTERVIEWER

You're frequently categorized as a "love poet" . . .

AMICHAI

Yes. Or a "Jerusalem poet." I hate that. "Love poet"—as if I have some special expertise at love, it makes me sound like a pimp! The concept of categorizing myself as a poet is repugnant to me—my reality is involved in so many things around and inside me. But people—academics, journalists—categorize because it's much easier for them to do so. There's one writer in Israel, Aharon Appelfeld, who is very well known in the United States too, who's been labeled a "Holocaust writer." If he writes a love story set in a kibbutz no one would read it—he's suppose to write only about the Holocaust. If I write a poem, or part of a poem, that deals with the Holocaust I'm told that I'm a love poet or a Jerusalem poet and that I shouldn't be writing about

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something that isn't within my territory—you're made into a kind of salesman who's not supposed to sell merchandise in someone else's business. When Woody Allen makes a movie which isn't comic, a movie dealing with tragedy, he's laughed at—he's supposed to be funny all of the time. I am, though, a love poet in this sense: I have a strong sense of "the other" in my poems, not too dissimilar from Montale's. An awareness of others, often another, a woman, enables me to perceive reality in still other, different ways—other antennae of feeling, vision. This way I see and feel more too.

INTERVIEWER

Do you see yourself as a poetic innovator?

AMICHAI

I see myself as a poet. I've always been acutely conscious of form, how form relates to expression. I've always been aware of breaking my language open—at a historical point when it was ready to be broken open—into its enormous potentials of expression. I suppose I was postmodern almost from the time I began writing poetry. I've written in many forms. I've always been attracted to the quatrain, a form that was prevalent in medieval Hebrew and Arabic poetry. I learned the form primarily from Samuel Ha-nagid, a medieval Jewish rabbi-poet in Spain during the Moorish reign, who used a very concentrated metrical line, with intricate rhymes. I use rhymes, I also use the sonnet form. Actually, if I'm correct, the first sonnets to be written in a language other than Italian after Petrarch were written in Hebrew by a friend of Petrarch's, a Jewish poet writing in Italy. I've written in free verse—of course, the poetry of the Bible is written in open forms. I've also used English and German forms, stanzaic forms, sonnets, but I never imposed these forms onto my language—instead, I transposed them into Hebrew, combining and mixing them with Jewish and Arabic forms. I like mixing different tech-

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niques and forms. A modern, or postmodern, composer might take the heart of a Bach fugue and break it open, expand it; what I do is put jazzy languages and techniques within classical forms, juxtaposing different, sometimes competing, language and forms. I usually feel, right from the beginning of a poem, the shape, the form, it will have—even before images or before particular words. I feel the form or shape almost visually, like a piece of sculpture—I can touch it. Then I fill in the form with my subjects, from the entire world of my subjects.

—Lawrence Joseph

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Alfred Corn

from 1992

1949

I took the water she gave me, a dark young woman
in a "Spanish," off the shoulder, ruffled blouse—
a cover girl, almost (like the maiden on the Sun-
Maid raisin box), remembering to smile for tourist
cameras, a bright "wine-stain" birthmark
on her arm prominent as she calmly
ladled draughts from *The Fountain of Youth*
into a paper cup, whose contents ignited
in noonday light. This was St. Augustine,
Florida, summer I was six going on seven.
Too young to see the paradox, I drank; and waited
for legendary water to transform my life.

The town boasted its fort from the Golden Century,
turreted, built of tabby, and "the oldest schoolhouse
in the United States." A steady stream of visitors
kept things lively, half to see the monuments, half
to turn a tone darker; and there was always
the barely reined-in surge of tropic leaves and flowers.
Ponce de Leon's public-relations name for the land
had in a sense come true, and these middle-aged
vacationers rediscovering their bodies
found a source mazes of cypress swamp
and jaws of the dragon had kept from him.

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(I'll say our server was Dolores Curtis,
a Tampa native, 23. Day's work done,
she walks to her apartment, a new Spanish
mission stucco, tiled in red terra-cotta.
The small white Zenith radio crackles
a broadcast speech of Harry Truman's.
Station break, static, a cigarette ad,
followed by Glenn Miller. Off comes the peasant
costume, panties, bra; on comes the shower.
A String of Pearls. . . . Bright drops spill
on white, honeycomb-patterned tiles
as she swaddles the towel into a turban,
pink hibiscus nodding outside the window,
the blood-red stamens dusted gold with pollen.

By 6:30 Wayne's driven up in his green Packard.
A "shave-and-a-haircut" knock on the door. "Two
bits,"
she says as she lets in his 100-watt smile,
fending him off, a little. Where to? The Shangri-La
Drive-In, famous for shrimp, fries, and Schlitz.

Afterwards they drive to the beach and park.
Lucky Tiger tonic slicking his pompadour
in place fails to hold as he takes a movie pose
over her. August heat and damp, a single mosquito
keening around them. She lets him go just so
far, not a step more until they're married.
Wayne works for his daddy, owner of five hundred
acres of citrus out from East Palatka, plus
some swamp acquired during the Florida Bubble.
He's supposed to make his own way, though,
and hasn't saved enough for down payment
on a house, not yet. A deep kiss, and it's too
far, as waves crash and collapse, foam races
along the shore, salt fragrance, the fountain of youth.)

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My first journey anywhere. Ragged silhouette
of distant palms, percussive sun, and,
farther out, beach grass and low shrubs that dot
the rolling dunes, dimpled swells of sand gliding
down to the brushed cymbals of an old Atlantic
whose unhindered horizon and somersaulting waves
left me dazed, thirsty, and blinking. The sunstarred
heft of the tide built and rebuilt its seagreen
redundant thunderheads to the steady roar
and quick applause of invisible crowds. A sand
castle modeled on their Spanish prototype
took form at the edge as I patted grainy
mortar into place and shaped a turret, only
to have it erased, along with my childishly
scrawled name, while the *perpetuum mobile*
waves slung their white lassoes higher and higher. . . .

All of this as we half-orphans put out tendrils
toward our new mother, twelve years Daddy's junior.
Herself a World War widow at 25, she was
  "brunette,"
stylish, affectionate, and liked to laugh.
Youngest of the children and the first,
in trustful desperation, to call her "Mama,"
I knew already *something* was wrong with me.
Missing a scented, nervous warmth since my second
  birthday,
I was fearful of everything—of transgression
and the punishment that followed, of going
to unfamiliar places, meeting strangers there.
Even now I dread these unmasked statements,
their therapeutic slant and trust in fact,
failure to scan or use productive rhyme
or metaphor. Yet can't deny the will to

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set out in search of what it is that shaped
one witness's imagining of time
(five late-20th-century decades sifting
numbered moments through the infinity
sign's tipped hourglass) and make available
the content of the world that is my case—
composed in part by all those I have met,
thinking through the story of who we are.

1977

An early fall swept in, the yellow leaf
flecked tobacco brown by late September
when we drove up to Boston to attend
the funeral. Only in his last year
had we met him, but not everyone is
Robert Lowell and the impression made
had been rapid, sharp, hypnotic. A friend
wrote out directions how to find the Church
of the Advent among brickfront houses
at the foot of Beacon Hill. His mourners
were already assembled when we got there,
among them, faces known from book jackets.
(A pew ahead sat Saul Bellow, who nodded
as friends passed.) Finally the first widow
strode alone and hatless down the aisle
to the front. The second, in a wide straw,
and flanked by daughters, looked left and right
with a tentative English stare. A number
of those present were, to judge by a familiar
set of features, Lowell cousins. Prayers
and scripture. His oldest writer friend
Peter Taylor read "Where the Rainbow Ends."
Dark woodwork of the neo-Gothic interior

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gleamed in half light. The organ poured
out old sherries by Bach and Stainer,
the liturgy unenthusiastic, as befit
a standing now reverting to the deceased.
I thought back to the times we'd met,
of strenuous opinions cobbled together so
we wouldn't be marooned on the barrenness
of monologue, and to merit his attention—
which how many are ever willing to grant,
even to the recommended young? No further
chance to earn it. Afterwards, outside,
cheerful words and a smile from Dick W.,
an intelligent handshake from Robert P.
Limo doors opened for the striking daughter,
for the little English son. A William Morris
pattern of oak leaves on the pavement, bare
black branches above, the silver Boston light,
traffic noise from over toward the Common.
With so little circumstance, a chapter ends.

(To be Martha Diodati is to peep from a dormer
window down onto Chestnut Street, gaze fixed
on a solitary pedestrian moving like a stylus
along the pavement. She wouldn't know him,
oh, but she might have once. Things rust,
they frazzle: people didn't always drive
everywhere. It's fearful, "even at my age,
dear, even then." Speaking in that rippling
way Mother had, like braille, feel it,
but you don't want to, naturally, unless
you've got a thing for insects. Spiders, too.
Brrr, there was one yesterday. Not as many
as had been at the Institute, thank God
that's been whirled away on the wings of the storm.

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WE SOMETIMES MAKE MISTAKES. Have and will.
Although. It could be less sad here, less sour,
with one cushion for the past, another for rumor.
Didn't *use* to lie. Conscience makes you, because
you can't stroke their fur the wrong way. Can't.
The only reason not to have gone ahead
with the marriage is, we knew it wouldn't
do, ever, not in a million years. All right,
if there's medicine to be swallowed, so be it.
Just because a person is cowardly in one
direction doesn't mean she is in another.
No, that wasn't our point. Wait. Lost the thread.
Why don't you listen? DON'T WANT TO. Abuse
of power. Now, this drawer wasn't locked before.
DON'T PRETEND the playing cards AREN'T IN it.
The idea that silver spoons are hiding there, too,
is just an excuse. Clarinda's present of a yellow
silk purse, oh dear, how many eons ago,
with but *one spoon* in it, for medicine,
otherwise, none. No more. Miss her awfully.
She doesn't come now. Said she was housebound,
like everybody else. But you lose track, eh?
Beans for lunch today and so it's Saturday,
but, otherwise, who would know? They'll never
tell, that much is certain. Abandoned to one's
relatives, a well-known disaster. But then,
there's nowhere else, not the Institute, never.
And there's the trust to manage, just can't.
Get tied in knots, the Gordian knot, it
won't let go, let you alone. Stop it, stop
it right now. OH, a slap. Please help. Stop.
Stop it up. So there. You were warned. They said.
It can be borne. But so sad. Why people bother.
Granted, there's nothing hateful about stretching
out on the sofa. If only one weren't alone.
When we were little, we took afternoon naps,

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but there's no point in that now. Hmm.
Uncle Abner brought pictures of dinosaurs—
the one with all the teeth, so terrifying.
He tried to be comforting, but it seemed . . .
wrong, very wrong. That very sofa, heavens,
keep forgetting, and then remembering. Well,
he's gone. Never tattled. We don't do that.
It would be. Like. Smashing the. Window to bits.)

1990

My month in the Santa Cruz Mountains at an end
I'd begun the solo homeward trip with a steady
twelve-hour pull the first day. In Sacramento
protesters on the steps of the Capitol waved signs
demanding wider literacy (and let me add
another voice to those that cried *Venceremos!*)

I-80 climbs high into the Nevada Range,
up where timber thins out near Donner Pass,
the skies cloudless and pure as melted snow.
I exited at Truckee for a short detour
down to Lake Tahoe, not quite destroyed yet
by condos, malls, and Trader Vics, since almost
nothing
can detract from snowcapped mountains mirrored
in blue lake water. (But, oh, for a well-aimed
bulldozer.) The Silver State registers as such
when highway Stop 'n' Shops are stocked with quarter
slot machines, handy for getting rid of loose change.
Who'd be willing, though, to miss the real thing,
and not get off at Reno to take a chance on Bally's,
joining anxious swarms of lemmings that pour into
the dim mystique of the hotel lobby? Casino's down

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a few steps, a vast catacomb lit with gaudy
neon and rank on marching rank of flashing lights. . . .
They are there still, grandmothers and Second War
vets
playing blackjack or pumping slots, the jingle
of coin punctuating proceedings as three kings
or cherries line up for paydirt. "Um, five tokens,
please."
But when the fourth one hit, I cashed them in and
fled,
as though canceling a courtship with disaster.

Nevada desert was a different prospect, traffic
at sunset minimal, a limitless terrain bare
of vegetation so that subtle mineral colors
crept out and constantly revised themselves
under the shifting play of angled light.
So far no one's seen fit to build at the foot
of the Humboldt Range, sierra remaining just
as it was in the beginning, a reservoir
of unparaphrasable content not qualified
by human intrusion, deepening as the tide
of night advanced and early stars pricked
the blue-to-green canvas stretched overhead.

After a few days, travel's dawn-to-dusk
arc of highway's no interruption to dreams
from the previous night, one speechless
ambient, always forward, fragments of a life
composing specimen years projected over
receding playbacks in the outside rearview
(its caption warning daytime sleepers that
OBJECTS IN MIRROR APPEAR CLOSER THAN THEY
ARE),

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until at last the pattern clarifies—though not
made manifest apart from varied contexts
assembled in collage, since character
has power to discover, over time,
expressive form within blank incident,
just as the lodestone can enchant a dust
of iron filings into the figure of a rose.

In this case, the compass rose, nor were travels
yet at their end. A scraping tumbleweed
caught under the car snapped me to attention
in North Platte, NE, where after a pit stop
common sense said no more driving today, and here
was The Lonesome Pine Motel.
Long nights in transit,
sparked up only by brief, stammering calls
to you, keeping watch in Ohio. After which,
an inventory never sufficiently varied:
brass lamp suspended from its chain, frying
TV, the brown shag rug and Ivory soap-leaves,
an old codger coughing up ice somewhere outside,
muffled cries and flushings consubstantial
with the darkness. . . . It has all blended
into one persistent habitation, The Room,
entered and vainly checked out of over
and again, impassive cradle for how many
tossings and turnings, how many standoffs
with the mirror, how many local news briefs
on Lions Club fundraisers for the deaf. . . .

State after state from the past brought into
the foreground. Ann and I once again sort out
colors of the thermal springs of Yellowstone,
drive up just in time to see Old Faithful
transform internal pressures into a huge plume
of energetic steam. Or Walter will pitch the tent

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in Promised Land Valley, up in the Poconos.
And I will cross the Mississippi, leaving behind
the white columns and wrought iron of Vicksburg.
Sometimes the radio's what turns back the clock—
now, for instance, when a newscaster announces
this morning that Sarah Vaughan has died, up floats
the woman guide at Whitman's house in Camden,
who looked like her. (Part of a trip two years
ago to Key West, the morning after a night
spent with Sandy's parents in Haverford.)
Directly opposite the county jail, the house
sat in a rundown sector of a depressed city.
Gesturing, combing a hand through her hair,
she mused with chiding fondness about someone
who might have been a slightly dotty uncle,
nevertheless, a genius. We could see the pain
of bereavement hadn't yet healed. Whispering,
she pointed out his tan Quaker hat preserved
in a glass case. Our greatest poet. . . . And now,
the FM station begins its half-hour tribute
by playing Vaughan's "Lullaby of Birdland."

Here's Minneapolis. Fair Cantonese
cooking served at a tourist-oriented
restaurant on Washington Avenue.
Order taken, why not fill the time by inventing
a life for the waiter?—the other one, I mean,
head propped, my fingers drumming on the
tablecloth.
He comes from Kodiak Island, Alaska. Is
Eskimo. Grew up in the shadow of the old
Russian Orthodox church steeple there
and was taught by the priest. What's more,
entered seminary himself but decided
he didn't have a calling. Part of him
wants to go back home, but his girlfriend

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has urged him to stay. She likes her job
at the Parks Department and only hopes he can
find work more rewarding than waiting tables.

When he brings the stainless covers, our eyes
meet and I'm tempted to ask for the actual
story. But of course say nothing. Instead,
revisit his island and hear a bell clanking
out Sunday morning across the frozen harbor
as late November mists hover over rooftops. . . .
Since invention also has an ache, an aura,
possibly something could be done with this?

After the meal, a drive down to the suspension
bridge, spotlit, thick with traffic whizzing over
from St. Paul. In midwinter, two decades back,
many finely tuned torments came to an end here.
Loss of rhyme, loss of life. Always a long shot
the bare, forked artist must be willing to risk
in the face of natural and human indifference,
the minus nine degrees receptiveness of both.

Always, too, a fought-for claim the wording of it
makes one's mind something more than one more
case,
a safe-conduct into the world of light.

(Elizabeth Krieger of Wausau has come with her little
girl Marcia to sit at the bedside of her dying aunt
in St. Paul. As a present she brought a small piece
of needlework made by the Hmong people, who
came
as refugees to Wisconsin from Southeast Asia.
It's a sort of appliqué, where various beasts

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drink at a spring in the Peaceable Kingdom.
Aunt Ramona was born in Ephraim, up on Green
Bay,
and they're all Moravian stock originally.
She's quite prepared to go, but glad that Betty came
to say goodbye. She listens to the news, all about
troubles with the Chippewa, who want to maintain
their spearfishing rights up at Lac du Flambeau
but have been called names and attacked by local
resisters. They think it's not fair and will ruin
line fishing—which it may well do, but the law
is the law. Marcia is fidgeting, so Aunt Ramona
tells Betty to give her a chocolate from the box
on the nighttable. Marcia chews a caramel and looks
at the yellow box, printed with letters she can't
read yet. But there are colored pictures—
a bluebird, flowers, a little pink house—but shaped
funny, out of little squares, like when water stays
on a windowscreen. Down in one corner is a brown
dog
with straight legs. Pretty flowers, but she likes
the bird better. On the back, other flowers, birds,
and a ship, with pointed flags. Mama isn't looking.
She takes another candy, which melts in her mouth
like jelly. They keep talking. Her foot itches.
She whispers a song as she takes the shoe off,
scratches, then has trouble getting it back on.
"What are you doing, Marcia?" Mama puts the shoe
on
and takes her into her lap. She was a late child,
the others are all off at college now, except John.
No hesitation, though, about having her when the test
came back. Tom was all for it. Still, in a way she felt
she'd outgrown the whole thing, even though every
step

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was so familiar. She felt a cramp or two and then
the water broke right while she was cooking supper.
Tom telephoned ahead, people were expecting them,
and it so happened Dr. Grossman was at the hospital.
She just felt a bit ridiculous going through it again,
feet in the stirrups, and having pain that, gracious,
you can't keep quiet about, however you try, like
having
your breath squeezed out through a wringer. A big
mess,
but that's part of it, and the nurses are so helpful.
The doctor put in the stitches, which anesthesia
didn't quite handle, but she got through it. And then
Marcia as red as an apple, but real quiet, quieter
than her brothers had been. There *is* something rare
about having a little girl, she's very glad she did.
It was like setting the clock back to the time
when Tom and she were just starting out, his first
years in the furniture business. He'd been secretary
for the Republican Club, made a lot of friends, then
resigned after Watergate because he said Nixon had
betrayed the principles of the party. Later on, Ford
reconciled him to it. Those were such days. Easier
now.
Marcia was with her when she'd driven up to the
Hmong
to see what they had. The lady who sold the
needlework
also had a little girl and it made such a bond
between them, even with the fact that her English
was skimpy and all. They have beautiful deep dark
eyes,
and do such intricate work. Oh. Marcia's climbed up
next to Aunt Ramona and given her a hug. It pushes
her glasses off center, "Marcia, be careful!" but

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a smile breaks across the soft, wrinkled face,
maybe it's all right—oh, but wait, Marcia has
chocolate smeared all over her hands. "Marcia!
Let Mother wipe your hands!" and Aunt Ramona
laughs.
Then straightens her glasses, smoothes her hair,
coughs,
and says, "It's time for Garrison Keillor's program.")

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Three Poems by August Kleinzahler

Song

You keep poking at it
finger, drill, snout & awl
till you find yourself at the back
of the shed
flush against some wall

Sing the song of homing
sing it once more
con brio
as the bright wind whips
the banners and shiny foil

—*Are you an* Ex-is-ten-tial-ist,
Mr. Mister?

—*O, no, no,*
I would prefer to think

of myself, ahem,
as a Collision-Ecstasist.

—*You undress on impact,*
sir?
—*O, hohohoho,*
not no more.

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A Valentine

Tired already or just confused?
Here, let's get rid of this one over here,
    put that there on top of there,
and give ourselves some room.

For what?
For the big white cloud spiring across the river
between the shimmer of a DC-10 and Grant's Tomb.

    —*Nice view,*
says the blonde with a dancer's haunch
and those dear, chewy Jersey vowels.
But the eyes are dull.

                Compared to whose?
Yours, in the dark.

Por que nao me disse o quanto gostou
de minha bunda quando fizemos amor?
                Because,
I'm swimming underwater
and might drown if I speak.

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Flynn's End

Flynn fell off the cablecar
and landed on his head.
Poor Flynn,
hardly Flynn anymore,
in a dory listing to starboard.

Flynn on his stool,
holding court down the block
at The Magic Flute,
his hound at his feet while old LPs
hissed and popped through the weekend:

Boccherini and Mississippi Fred,
the plucky chanteuse and gag tunes.

Flynn with his mug of rum
and that faraway gaze—
a wryness at the eyes and mouth
frozen into a carapace
over some enormous hurt.

You see it in the look of old beatniks
at their rituals
in the bar window, solemnly
playing cards at noon,
afflicted with some private wisdom
denied parturition.

Flynn, drunk and alone
in his shop weekday afternoons
with binfuls of concerti
and wailing brass.
Alone with his dog
and his rum and the fog
coming in and too stiff
to get up and change the record.

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And Flynn with his secret poems
in a fancy red box,
thwarted and feverish and illustrated
by a suburban Beardsley,

whatever ache or shame
prettified, made diffuse and tied
with a rhyme
like a ribbon round a present.

The ghost of him presiding
over those last, lost afternoons
weeks after the earthquake,
laths and studs showing through
the walls, and plaster
sprinkling the ancient Vocalions.

A consortium bought the block
and the old place has a new front
with black glass,
very minimal, very flash
and sells computer software.

And Flynn drifts further and further to sea
in his bed at Laguna Honda.

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Two Poems by Cynthia Zarin

The Pamet Puma

Puma, cougar, mountain lion, loup—
  this is what I am afraid of, Ocarina,
small singing goose in the break-ax
wood, that you will be gone, and in
    your place

fur moving, indistinguishable from sand.
  The Pamet River rides to salt, the dunes
are hills of thunder, the sky
doesn't fall because you don't think
    of it,

but those vines you nest in
  are the tops of buried trees, two eyes
shine like spearmint in the witch
grass, and even your voice neither
    persuades

nor dissuades him. He will not come out.
  The syrinx doesn't call him. He knows
the place where the lamb lies down.
You who keep yourself to yourself,
    who have

your own face on, who know that loup
  means mask, loup-garou a werewolf,
and catamount is any wild cat, bay-lynx
is the end of trying to put
    a name

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to him, *Rufus* of the Atlantic,
the bobcat. Apples in a moon-pail
of water, outline of dry bones
on a doorsill, spine of a dogbane
leaf

that prevents speech, a fish jaw
that won't go down—all say, "bob
means to strike." But the puma
isn't curious. His prints are
carbon,

his coat is fire, and I, who dress
my fear to talk it down, want to shelter
you in the barberries—you, who don't
court trouble, who won't search for the
needle

in the haystack, who beating two
flat stones together merely laugh:
puma, catamount, panther, bobcat,
the aim of the boomerang is not to
come back.

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Recollection

White had a claim upon my heart the winter
storms left snow hip-deep on Truro's arm
and sleeved the backshore's wrist and gloved the hand
that held the white bay like a lifted cup.
Under the violet village lamps, the whitened
houses threw one square and its fellow down
to make a crossword shadow-quilt of town
and we might have been a dream that Capricorn

had spun. And planetary, you and I
dozed in the keeping attitudes of love
until the house was a bottle carried out
and we were paper printed with its plan
so drifting in another winter's glass
we then could check its latches if we rose.

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Two Poems by Baron Wormser

Somerset County

The log-crammed trucks smash the yielding air,
Whine like leviathan gnats.
Last week a trucker died at the wheel
On the way home from the mill.
He fell asleep. Or did he wake before?
The wreck looked like a freighter run aground.

One January day, a pulpwood driver tells me,
He skidded the better part of a quarter mile
Toward a stopped school bus.
He played the brake and gears
Like the valves of a trumpet, soft and hard.
And he said he saw himself as a boy:
"About eight years-old—
You forget that stuff."

If summer here is the sovereign remedy,
The pure swat of northern heat,
Its pleasure lies in ineffability
The true green that governs growing things
But is bound to retreat,
Bound to turn sullen and spare,
Bound to wait wordlessly in the spell of winter.
Patience was never a human virtue
And never will be.

At the end of August the air is so clear and light
A body could levitate,
Fly off without benefit of preacher or motor,
Shedding the responsible wrenches, the keys.
That's a *fantasy*—not a word I hear often
If ever.

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Hard knowledge wants a sharp edge.
A pile of metal filings from lathe or saw is swept
To the floor or ground and forgotten,
The power of work needing that precision
And that waste.

On the Bus to Houston

Smashing sticks of gum till her jaw smarts,
Looking for something out there to look at,

Some scenery while the guy beside her
Keeps stretching his mouth but says nothing.

He gives off a crazy-type vibe: he could
Lose it any minute and not know it.

He is going to touch her, she knows it.
She's sat on more than one daddy's knee

And she doesn't want the littlest touch of those hands.
The book in her lap stays shut—a mystery,

People talk to each other, kill each other;
It makes a kind of twisted sense.

She's wearing black though no one in her life has
died.
It's her traveling dress; it keeps people quiet.

In a pale, taunting way she's pretty:
As if that mattered, as if there were

An honest man to whom she could say
That her beauty has been a joke.

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The guy is going to fall asleep.
He looks sort of dog-like sweet.

He isn't though. She's too educated
About the wrong things. Somewhere in books

Her twin is alive. She's not better
Or worse. What she is, is clear

As if someone cleaned a body, cleaned
It till it glowed like nobody's dream.

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Alan Michael Parker

The Meniscus

Wild asters. A blue
wasp shudders in the gravel.
Laundry on the line:
yesterday, the day before.
Lie down, to where
the crickets leap,
where an ant shoulders
a mountainous crumb—as the sun
fills the jungle grass, sifting
through 3 o'clock. There
are different kinds of hours
to spend: some harden
like a fossil, some peel away to
emptiness, some burst
on the vine. There are
different kinds of memories.

Do the fingertips remember?
The elbow seems to know
what the infant likes.
The blood hums to the moon's tug.
Reflex is a memory,
a muscle in a sleeve,
while sleep is soon forgotten,
—and breakfast, and making
love, aside from
the last time we made love.

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There are memories like olives,
clinging to a pit: anger,
fear, each electric
childhood shock. There are
memories like air,
the dream-scrawl of cumulus,
the man I'm sure I've met.

4 o'clock. An hour
spills into the next.
I've met this man before,
this abstract, crooked man.
Softly, my future spends his day.

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On the Adolescence of Middle-aged Men

George Konrád

Early Experiences

In my adolescence, I dreaded the thought of marriage. No slave state could oppress me as thoroughly as a wife. Marriage was like patriotism; no wonder politicians were all for it. On the other hand, when you thought about it, what could be more wonderful than to walk into the late afternoon of greater Budapest and pick up a woman? Or to buy yourself a woman for the night, a fresh new miracle served hot with all the trimmings that go with living flesh? Let us now tactfully follow the route of young János Dragomán. He comes to a yellow intersection, turns right, enters the first building. A neoclassical apartment house with a wide courtyard; wild grapes on a green fence; the smell of fried meat and stewed cabbage. On the pale pink marble stairs, a frayed reddish runner. The brass handle is high on the heavy door; the bell hums

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invitingly. This young man should be solving the world's problems in a long philosophical poem, but he is here instead, standing in front of this door. In a short while he'll be face to face with Madame Calypso.

Madame Calypso is the greatest public mother-in-law of all time. She looks hard at your face, exchanges a few words with you, and knows exactly which woman to give you—like a wise old-time waiter who sizes up a person in a glance and brings him either cabbage soup or something spicier. The more daring guests, of course, want not only her girls but Madame Calypso herself. János is getting cold feet, but before he can turn and run back down the stairs, the maid, wearing a black hat and veil, opens the door. She leads him into the hallway. He'll have to wait a little. She presses a button, and a wall parts. On a small stage bathed in mauve light, an extremely large woman with flaming red hair appears before him. Green paint under the eyes; orange yellow lipstick; ultramarine nightgown. "Your first time, isn't it, little prince? And I suppose you want a discount and sympathy? I know all about initiation, my dear. I have just the one for you. Do sit down and let's drink a toast to our friendship. I hope you will visit us again. I hope that our artistic institution can please the new generation, too. I will now put a black cloak over your head and remove it only when it's time. Remember, little prince, you are not taking an examination. There are no problems to solve and no grade is given. Relax."

He hears a rustling. Even through the cloak he can sense the light's turning red. A piano plays. The cloak is removed. He sees the piano player, a bald man with a white cane and dark glasses, who is only pretending to be blind. A tiny bell rings, and Dragina glides into the room. A strange coincidence of names, Dragomán, Dragina. She puckers her lips; her eyes are smiling, her hair is straw blond, her whole body still tanned from last summer. She wears a light lemon-colored robe and nothing under it. Her pubic hair, too, is straw blond. "You

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want me?" she asks. János nods. "Follow me!" she says. When he nods obediently, his wavy brown hair falls across his forehead. In the hallway she looks back at him; with a jerk of his head he flicks the hair back into place. A twittering of canaries.

Dragina puts her arm around János's neck. "My little seducer. Here is my room. You may lock the door. Take a few deep breaths, walk around the room a few times. You can look out the window, too." Stretching her long legs, she settles down on a hassock. "For your information, I am of Scandinavian-Polish descent, noble and proud. Now you can look at me. Yes, this room is mine only. The other girls can't come in here. Tell me, love, how much money you have on you." "A hundred forints." "In what denominations?" "Twenties." "And what did you hear about the price?" "Fifty?" "And how much did you plan to pay?" "Sixty." "A generous gentleman. Some people bargain, you know. Sometimes I pick a man even though I know his character is bad. Once, a man died right on top of me, and he wasn't that old, either. And once, a filthy creature offered to pay me anything if I took a taxi with him to the cemetery at Farkasrét and let him screw me on top of a grave. His mother's? Of course. How did you know? Do you read about that in your schoolbooks? I'm talking like this because I know it's your first time with a woman and I want you to loosen up a little. I imagine your heart is in your throat, poor thing. I'll take all five twenties. I want you to be left with nothing. You'll borrow or do without, but you will think of me.

"Before you lie down next to me," she says, "take a good look at the hill between my legs. You see it? It's yours. Approach it wisely. Let's not deprive ourselves of pleasure. Approach, withdraw, approach. Take your time. Now, just fit it in nicely. Good. And now get into a rhythm, tear me up, my precious. Let our throats fill with wild noises." And she demonstrates a wild noise. A shudder courses through the jungle.

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Dragina had small pointed breasts. Her body was slender and unaccountably fragrant. On her left arm I saw a tattooed number, Auschwitz. She was nineteen, I was fifteen. When she came back from the camps, she had no one. She met Madame Calypso. Sometimes she would wake with her own screaming; in her dreams she was being whipped. I sold my books to see her. Eventually she married, and in 1956, with her children, settled in New Zealand. She jogs and swims every morning and sails in her own private little bay.

Amalia

As János goes up the stairs, his neighbor Amalia comes down the stairs. She is on her way to church and then to do her shopping. She is nearer seventy than sixty but still walks with a bounce in her step and sways her hips. And János still finds her beautiful. She was the second woman he saw naked and was permitted to embrace. That was forty years ago. In those days, Amalia was the talk of the building; of the children in the courtyard, the women on the balconies, and the men around the card tables outside in the square. Even in the kosher wine cellar of the Jewish community, they spoke of Amalia. Her blond hair in a large bun; her full lips and full breasts; her solid body. Before he dashed his brains out on the concrete below, Amalia's husband, hurling himself from the fourth floor, found time to yell, "I love you, Amalia!" Of course he loved her. Who didn't? The brass plate on her door was always sparkling; her pantry was always full of apricot jam. She was all summer laughter. Her next husband had a freshly ironed shirt waiting for him every morning and a piece of fried meat with his customary tea. Amalia's bedroom was fragrant with the lavender she kept among her linen.

Now past his fourteenth birthday, János followed Amalia on her morning rounds, keeping a respectful dis-

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tance. He was on the hunt. One morning, at the market, standing behind her, he opened his mouth and in a voice that sounded strange even to him said, "I'll carry that basket for you." There was a bottle of milk, cherries, a live hen and eggs in the basket. When they reached her kitchen door, János, once again, with the daring of one who prepares himself for a mortal leap, said what was in his heart: "I'll help you with the cherries." His joy bordered on delirium when he was admitted. He was allowed to sit on a low stool by a white enamel bowl, in which the shiny, bleeding, pitted bodies of sour cherries were soon piling up. Meanwhile divine Amalia took a kitchen knife, whose blade had become quite thin through repeated sharpenings, and so adroitly slit the throat of the hen that it did not even have time to screech. As she cleaned the bird, she found a number of eggs inside it. That made her happy; they would taste wonderful in the soup, she said. János asked the lady of the house if he could kiss her. Amalia laughed, thought for a moment, then said, "All right, you may kiss me." She had only to put the knife down. He had never felt anybody's tongue in his mouth before. It was a soft, slow-turning tongue. He felt her heavy breasts, her belly against him, and his pants grew wet. "Come," Amalia said, and drew him into her room, where there was a sofa, a large radio and a conjugal double bed. The bed was piled high with pillows, quilts, eiderdowns. Covered with pink plush, it seemed like a tall strawberry shortcake with the kind of whipped cream that made your teeth stick together. János would have loved to fall on it, but he didn't dare. Amalia turned on the radio. First, the song "My Room Is Filled with Tears." Then a report on the flooding. It was the season of heavy summer rains. From Paks to Mohács, the Danube was rising. Beyond the wardrobe, in the corner, behind a finely embroidered curtain, were a shower stall and a bidet, installed by Amalia's first husband. One of her girlfriends claimed that Amalia shaved and scented her private parts. She had

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once seen her doing it. In those days, rubbing your whole body with a milk-based cream was considered a lewd act. Amalia also had her unique perfume, a kind János never again encountered. It was prepared by Amalia herself, from flowers and who knows what else.

And now she faced János, her dress open in the front. She kept the boy at arm's length, searched for something in his eyes. Whenever Amalia hurried by the men of the building, whether they were young or old, she panted slightly, smiling at her own haste. Once, on the street, a man grabbed her bottom. With the back of her hand she hit him with such swiftness and force that he called to the police for help. People always greeted Amalia with a feeling of happy surprise, even when they had been talking behind her back, saying bad things about her. In the early summer, already in her light, red silk dress, she would walk past us, her arms and calves the color of fresh rolls, gliding by as if on a magic carpet. At the butcher's she got the best pork chops; at the dairy, her sour cream awaited in her own special china cup. If movers had ever showed up at her apartment, the whole building would have been brokenhearted.

Chappy's jazz band was playing on the radio when their bodies parted. Amalia cleaned János with the wet corner of a towel she had prepared earlier, because he was a little bloody. Then she covered herself with a housedress and peered out the window. In another corner of the room stood a sewing machine. Amalia was a seamstress; her husband, a taxi driver. And taxi drivers, with their flexible schedules, could come home at the most unexpected moments. The sofa was covered with a red spread. The alarm clock, too, was red, as was the armchair slipcover. Only the curtain wasn't red; a red curtain would have been too much. It was lemon yellow. Amalia loved the color red. Her mother was Turkish. Her father had brought his young bride from Bosnia, where he served with the army. Turkish women are accommodating; their husbands, blessed. After a brief dis-

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cussion Amalia and János felt the need to unite again. This way, that way, all possible ways. She breathed hard, made a strange groan and said the word *good* very slowly through her teeth. Exhausted, they lay beside each other. More cleaning off, more peering out the window. The radio inveighed against the church. Amalia, at the window again, turned quickly and almost threw János out of the apartment. "Go! Now!" He went downstairs and out to the square. Just then, swinging his flat cap in his hand, the taxi driver was turning the corner.

The taxi driver was unable to impregnate Amalia, who wanted children. Along came the bus driver and fortune smiled on him. Amalia gave birth to a girl. For many years the daily routine remained unchanged. The bus driver came home in the early afternoon, shoved Amalia into bed, and afterward snacked on meatballs, which he washed down with a glass of wine. Grabbing his fishing gear, he would go fetch their daughter from school, and together they'd make themselves comfortable on the bank of the Danube, north of the blown-up Elizabeth Bridge, where schoolgirls sat with their books, and lovers were busy kissing. This was where he liked to sit with his daughter and his worms. While he set up his rod and reel, the little girl would sing what she had learned that day in the school choir. Her father thought she was destined to be an opera singer. But at home, Amalia would beg her, "Dear, would you please stop that caterwauling?"

One afternoon, the bus driver came home to find that his little girl had been shot by a boy who lived on the fourth floor, while they were playing with the revolver that belonged to the boy's father, an army officer. Amalia had been in the kitchen baking jam turnovers for the children, whom she heard whispering in the living room. Perhaps they were a little in love with each other. Then there was a loud bang. The children had been playing execution. The boy made the girl kneel and shot her in the back of the head. No, she would never get up again,

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and she would never be an opera singer. The boy thought he had removed all the bullets from the cylinders, but one had been left in. The officer was sent to jail and the boy to a correction home, and the mother moved away. Amalia and her husband remained, now childless. The bus driver kept taking his fishing rod to the Danube, but would come home with his bucket empty, staggering rather than walking. Instead of fishing, he'd drink from a bottle of wine and tell anybody who'd listen about his little girl. There he was often joined by an old man whose wife had put their one and only grandchild out to nap on their balcony, and the child got too cold and died. The old man also brought a bottle to the river. A mole on the bus driver's neck became infected and painful. It was removed at a hospital, and a week later a telegram summoned him to the cancer ward. Not long after, Amalia was wearing black.

Double Aria about the Year of Change(s)

"We should get out of here," János said to Kobra in the fall of 1949, after the beginning of the school year and the Rajk trials. Rumor had it that the border was being mined. We had learned this lesson in the war: Flee the place where they lock you in. Kobra, who in the meantime had begun to study English, French and Russian, answered by quoting the famous line: "Here you must live and die." A true patriot does not abandon his homeland. But the propeller plan should not be thrown out; we may need it someday. According to this plan, we would become living submarines in the Danube: propellers attached to our bellies below us, and a length of rubber tubing in our mouths. The tubing would be camouflaged on the surface of the river by twigs fastened to a piece of floating corkwood. We'd sail to Mohács first, from there travel underwater and surface somewhere in Yugoslavia. Kobra had already carved Tito's name in his

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bench at school. True, he did it low, close to the floor; it was hardly noticeable. If Tito, whom both Radio Moscow and the BBC had praised to the skies during the war, was the most confounded heretic, that was enough for Kobra to like him. In all of Europe, it was the Yugoslavs who had put up the strongest, most tenacious and most successful resistance to the Nazis. They were the least infected by cowardice. From Yugoslavia the boys would proceed to all five continents.

To survey the site, they actually sailed to Mohács. They slept in a tent and floated in Laura's keelboat, letting the Danube rock them on its wide back. They enjoyed themselves. They swam in quiet tributaries and dove off a blown-up dam into water that was green, deep and wonderfully perilous. They were sixteen. Then, in Mohács, they heard that there was a wire net spread under the water, lifted only for boats that passed through legally. So much for that idea.

Ten years later, in the company of friends, they were talking about this propeller plan. Everybody had a good laugh. Kobra and János could still not agree on whether it would have been better to put the propeller on their stomachs or behind, over their buttocks. In front, and underneath, it could damage your family jewels; in back, on top, it would not be hidden from view. The plan still had some flaws. The informer sitting at the corner of their table was all ears. Dezső had to be all ears, because from early childhood he had been hard of hearing. János liked to tease him. "How strange, Dezső, to be an informer and half-deaf. There is something heroic about it. If you like, I'll dictate a nice little statement for you, slowly. I'm sure you could use it. I just got out of jail. And why shouldn't I help you out? After all, we were classmates. You buzzed around us even then. You, my dear Dezső, are our favorite informer. So then, to continue, Dezső, by leaving jail I came out of the inner circle into the outer circle. I wouldn't say there is no difference between the two, I wouldn't say that at all, because in

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there, for example, I couldn't ask the waitress for a vodka. You keep an eye on things. But we do, too, you know. I must tell you, Dezső, that your prose is too bland, too pedantic. Your reports should be better written. The historians of the future will depend a great deal on the informers of today. . . . "

The Strong Man

I always hated school. I hated the hurry, the fear of being late. The smell of school. Having to say hello left and right before eight in the morning. The prize pupil of the class turns to say, "Hello, David. A new week, new possibilities." My answer: "You want me to strangle you?" He just laughs. I hated nothing more than to listen to other people's chatter in the morning, when my mind was still fresh and active. I wanted to read. In school, my fellow humans are apes. I have to sit for five hours among forty apes, look at their shoes, their hair and hear their inane reports. The beginning of the roll: Agamek, an idiot; Bakó, an idiot. And so on. For my eyes, the old brown slate roof of the house across the street is a pasture of relief. Winter sparrows on the lightning rod; icicles on the eaves. With the spring thaw, the snow, yellowish and hardened, would slip down the roof, the light reflected in its network of grooves. How dare this strange man rebuke me: "Mr. Kobra, would you please return your gaze to education? And kindly keep your sarcastic remarks to yourself." And I answer: "Good teacher, spare me. I'm *Mimosa pudica,* sensitive plant."

On the facade of our school, at the far end of the square, four Muses muse. Their gold has turned brown, as has the wall of decorative brick. Inside, it is dark. The floors are covered with oil to keep the dust down. The wooden windowsills are grayish green, covered with carved initials. The sooty light of winter filters through the dirty panes. I like to sit in the back and look out these

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windows. I don't want anybody behind me, fiddling with my back or spying on me, seeing what I'm reading. Sitting in the back, by the window, is the closest thing to not being there at all. Antal is in front of me, providing a good barrier, and János, next to me; he jabs me in the ribs if I've been asked a question. "Sir, I'm sorry, but I can put up with school only if I'm allowed to sit in the last row. Please forget your seating plan. Either I stay here in the back, or I jump out the window."

Not that the teachers are all bad. Some, in fact, are good, even excellent. . . . When it comes to showing off, teachers can hold their own. They're all performers, each playing himself. Let's call on Arpád Bolensky, lecturer of mathematics. You may begin, Professor.

"All right, Mr. Kása, you may sit down. Mr. Kása is stupid, gentlemen, fatally stupid. He will remain stupid all his life. That is why nothing fazes him. Mr. Kása does not mind our lesson in mathematics as long as he can go on taking bites out of his goose-liver sandwich. His intellect focuses on the secretion of his stomach. His appetite is not spoiled by non-Euclidean geometry. Mr. Kása, with his goose-liver sandwich, expensive shoes and fine clothes, lives better than poor Arpád Bolensky, teacher of mathematics, physics, Greek and philosophy, summa cum laude, who in two world wars had his skin perforated several times by bullets because he was too cowardly to desert. And now this miserable teacher with an ugly and sickly wife at home and only a photograph of his daughter in his wallet—she was killed by a bomb—has to stand here and inhale the odor of Mr. Kása's goose-liver sandwich. But I want my students to know that my life is not without its pleasures. I am now reading *The Brothers Karamazov* for the seventh time, gentlemen. I spoil myself with a cup of coffee after my modest supper. I scratch the head of my dog as I read. My eighteen-year-old cat takes her place on the back of my armchair. I occasionally give in to the temptation of a bribe, but am careful that it is done publicly, for all to see, as is happening now.

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Ahem! No matter how stupid he is, I will let Mr. Kása pass, so that our school may be rid of him at last. On one condition. I assume that his carnivorous family tosses a number of bones into the garbage. I hereby call upon him, in front of witnesses, to put aside—or have his family's cook put aside—those bones and deliver them every Monday, before class, to my house, for my dog, who in our household has not the luxury of such a tasty item in his bowl. Behold, Mr. Kása, the price of graduation. Gentlemen, as I look at you, I am compelled to reduce the dignity the word *man* conjures up. I can do nothing else while standing here before you. For what can a poor teacher of mathematics do, who is pierced, nay, perforated with bullet holes and who hands over his salary, to the last penny, in an envelope, to his ugly, sickly but still good-hearted wife?

"All right, who said that?" Suddenly he stops, turns halfway around, as if to shoot from the hip with his left hand. "What did you say, Kobra? If you have any balls, Mr. Kobra, you will repeat what you just said. Aha. *Lux perpetua luceat tibi!* So the eternal light should shine for me? I should drop dead, is what you mean? Gentlemen, Mr. Kobra has given voice to the age-old wish of students regarding their teachers. Very well, impudent cur, you will stay after class for ink soup and paper dumplings.

"It is a human being you see before you, ladies and gentlemen. This teacher of mathematics, for whom Mr. Kobra, the blackguard, wishes eternal light, is a wretched man, wretched to the uttermost core of his heart. See my wounds. Here, on my chest. I'll remove my shirt so you can see them. And here, on my side, is another wound, and here, in my loins, and on my wrist, and on my ankle. Gentlemen, you have in common one advantage over me, namely, that you have survived me. Don't laugh, Kása. Your turn will come, and soon. A problem now for you all, for your feeble little brains! A problem to make even the geniuses among you quail. Get out your pencils, gentlemen. And no daydreaming about whores while

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you're working. I'll do that for you. The whores are mine, all the best ones! I, Arpád Bolensky, mathematics teacher, am the king of the whorehouse, and not this snot-nose freshman, Kobra, whom I send to the pharmacy for *canis merga.* In that salon where strawberry lights smooth out all wrinkles, the ladies buzz around me, ignoring the sour Dragomán, whom I can compare only to Thersites. They laugh, they double up with laughter, as I deliver one wonderful joke after another. Note: They do not put cherry bombs under my chair. They do not put sneezing powder in my roll book. Or smear garlic into the collar of my overcoat. And I assure you it would not occur to any of them to bleat while I lecture. In that whorehouse, no one eats hot bread during the first period so that during the second, which is mine, he can blast stinking farts under my nose. No old-age home awaits me there. There, people can tell the difference between gold and sand. When I look at you, my dear students, I see forty bags of sand! But even if you are sand, you must sit still and listen. Quiet, there, in the corner!

"I will do selections from my program. I have been performing for quite a long time. Alas, my tuxedo has grown shiny with wear. The wings of my bow tie droop. My prostate, however, I am happy to report, is under control. The crotches of my pants are not yellowed by the laggard few drops that always remain in the hose that slumbers like an old dog. I can still afford the gold bridges in my mouth; I can still have my chin lifted. We are still keeping pace; the master is ageless, an indestructible wild boar, a thoroughbred stallion. Make way, make way for the *princeps maximus!* One of my stage names is Christo, the strongman.

"I performed one number that was not bad at all. *Pro primo.* I come on stage and slap my left biceps with a length of iron rod. The rod bends. There you are, gentlemen, all you strong johnnies and musclemen, come up on stage! Try to bend it back, straighten it out. Don't be bashful! No volunteers? Some men do come up. A sneer

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of contempt on my lips: for all their straining, they can do nothing with the rod.

"*Pro secundo.* An iron bar with a seat at either end attached by a chain. Well, gentlemen, who among you weighs the most? All you blubber boys, sacks of salt, Gargantuas with king-size behinds, come up here and take these seats. Two ungainly mountains of flesh clamber up on stage, sit down—and I lift the bar high into the air. I could do it with one arm, but a display of such strength might frighten them. One remains alone in mourning as well as in glory, whose wages are nothing but envy.

"And now we come to *pro tertio,* the climax. Two men carry in two gigantic steel blades, cutting edge up, fastened to a stand like a sawhorse. A flourish from the band, and Araukána, my twenty-five-year-old partner, prances in, a magnetic, fatally attractive Andalusian mare. She hugs me, and at the touch of her breasts I fall into a trance. My body is now taut, stiff as a board. In this state I am placed on the two razor-sharp blades. One under my ankles, the other under my neck. I lie across them as straight as a rod, a sweet smile on my face, as if I were resting on the softest couch.

"Then two muscle-bound giants stride onstage. Compared to them, our bodies are like graceful violin bows. On a crude cart these two gentlemen roll in an enormous rock. With all their might, their faces turning red, they huff and puff and lift the rock and put it—where, you'll never guess—on my stomach. The audience is stunned. The marrow is frozen in their spines. And your teacher lies unflinching under that stupendous weight. His body doesn't sag the least bit. It's as if a balloon had been placed on top of him.

"A woman screams, 'It'll cut off his head!' She means the blade under my neck. Araukána smiles mysteriously. And then, with enormous sledgehammers, the two giants begin to pound the rock on top of me from both sides. And note: Any member of the audience can at any time

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inspect the blades, can try to move the rock or lift the hammers, to verify that these are not the props of a magician. Everything is nerve-rackingly real. I am being pounded by two wicked Hephaestuses, scar-faced, their chests covered with pitch-black hair.

" 'Do you see that? He's taking it! Lord of Heaven, he's taking it!' And with such aplomb. He rests on the blades as a bridge rests on its piers. Why doesn't the blade cut into Arpád Bolensky's neck? Why doesn't his spine snap? Why doesn't our teacher fall into a chopped-up, mutilated mass of bleeding flesh? Don't worry; nothing of the kind will happen. But probably that's just what you'd like to see, eh, ignoramuses? You'd like to be eyewitnesses, wouldn't you? Watch your teacher's dismemberment close up? Drooling for some action, for a little gore. But the two hefty assistants lift Christo unharmed off the blades. The only signs of his ordeal are two pink lines, one at the nape of his neck, one across his ankles.

"They put me on my feet. Araukána takes off her silver crimson cloak and wraps me with it. I come out of my trance. I offer the whites of my eyes to the light. I stand on tiptoe, hold Araukána's lizard fingers high in the air, and I bow toward you, ladies and gentlemen. Attendants run in and dress me. Top hat and cane. With a white-gloved hand I twirl my cane and look the audience straight in the eye. They are mine now, completely. For three minutes we are all silent. No clearing of throats, no rustling of candy wrappers. Now is the perfect time for the message. The lesson to be learned from what just took place. Our credit is good. We have demonstrated—haven't we?—the miracle of mind over matter. With a little help from the supernatural. Here the teacher stands, his own Lazarus. And then what happens? Nothing happens. I wave my hand in resignation.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the truth is, I live alone. Araukána belongs to one of my giant assistants, if not to both of them. Only on the stage does she embrace me.

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I have sired a dozen children, all with such brave genes that they have every one of them gone out to dare the world; in other words, they have dispersed globally. On this square, which despite renovation and the new lights is still seedy, like myself, I am the only one left of my large family. And for what? To sweep the ancestral crypt. To be a tent pole, a scarecrow. 'Are you still there, old man, babbling away in the Crown?' my sons and daughters ask when occasionally they bother to call. 'Still spouting, are you, showing off, feeding your old lines to your second-rate public? The world has passed you by, Papa. You're out of it.' What are you doing here, Mr. Christo? Weren't you told not to come here anymore? Tell your tall tales at home, to the four walls. Here, at the Crown and its Ecstasy Bar we keep our stories short. We offer bright lights and happy music against the nasty hours of the night."

—translated from the Hungarian
by Imre Goldstein

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

FICTION

Edward Jones grew up in Washington, D.C. and now lives in Alexandria, Virginia. "Marie" is his first fiction to appear in a magazine, and is taken from his collection of stories, *Lost in the City,* which will be published by Morrow in July.

George Konrád was born in 1933 in Hungary. In 1990 he became the first Central European president of International PEN. He was awarded the 1991 Peace Prize of the German Book Trade. He lives in Budapest. **Imre Goldstein**, his translator, is a native of Hungary. Goldstein has translated books from Hebrew and Hungarian into English and works as a theater director and playwright in Greensboro, North Carolina.

Nancy Lemann is the author of two novels, *Lives of the Saints* (1985) and *Sportsman's Paradise,* from which the excerpt in this issue is taken, forthcoming this year from Alfred A. Knopf.

Norman Manea was born in 1936 in Bukovina, Romania. He was deported at the age of five to the Ukranian concentration camp of Transnistria. In 1986 he left Romania for the United States, where he is now a professor of literature at Bard College. "Portrait of the Yellow Apricot Tree" is taken from his collection of stories, *October Eight O'Clock,* forthcoming from Grove Press. This is his first English-language publication. **Cornelia Golna**, his translator, lives in Bucharest, Romania. This is her first published translation.

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Jean Rouaud, a former newsstand vendor, won France's Prix Goncourt in 1990. He lives in Paris. **Ralph Manheim** has translated many works from the French and German, including those of Celine and Günter Grass.

POETRY

Yehuda Amichai is the subject of an interview in this issue. His translators, **Barbara** and **Benjamin Harshav**, have collaborated on numerous books of translation, most recently Amichai's *Even a Fist Was Once an Open Palm with Fingers*. Barbara Harshav is a freelance translator. Benjamin Harshav is professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature at Yale University.

Robert Bensen teaches writing at Hartwick College and Caribbean literature in St. Lucia, Trinidad and Venezuela.

Henri Cole is the author of *The Marble Queen* and *The Zoo Wheel of Knowledge*. He lives in New York City.

Alfred Corn's new book of poetry, *Autobiographies*, from which the sections of the long poem, *1992*, in this issue are taken, will be published later this year by Viking Penguin.

Gerrit Henry's first book of poems, *The Mirrored Clubs of Hell*, was published last spring. He is a contributing editor at *ArtNews* and writes for *Art in America*.

Rodney Jones teaches in the writing program at Southern Illinois University. *Transparent Gestures*, his most recent book of poems, won the National Book Critics' Circle Award in 1989.

Paol Keineg was born in Brittany, and publishes work in both French and Breton. The translations in this issue are taken from the long poem *"Alphabet Circulatoire,"* which appeared in French in *Silva rerum*, his eleventh collection of poetry. He is on the faculty of Duke University.

C.D. Wright, his translator, has published five collections of poetry, is a co-editor of Lost Roads Publishers and teaches at Brown University.

Karl Kirchwey's first book of poems, *A Wandering Island*, appeared in the Princeton Series of Contemporary Poets in May 1990. Recent poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Antaeus*, *The New Criterion* and *The New Yorker*. He is the director of the Poetry Center of the 92nd Street YM-YWHA in New York.

August Kleinzahler lives in San Francisco. His work has appeared in *Harper's*, *The New Yorker* and *Sulfur*. He is the author of *Earthquake Weather*.

Robert J. Levy is the author of three collections of poetry. His work has appeared in *Poetry*, *The Georgia Review*, *Boulevard* and other journals. He lives in New York City and is the managing editor of United Features Syndicate.

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Thomas Lynch is the author of *Skating with Heather Grace.* He lives in Milford, Michigan where he is a funeral director.

Eugenio Montale was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1975. He was a literary and music critic, essayist, writer of short stories and the author of several books of poetry including *Cuttlefish Bones, The Occasions* and *The Storm and Other Things.* He died in 1981. **William Arrowsmith**'s translations of Montale's *The Storm and Other Things* and *The Occasion* were awarded the Premio Internazionale Eugenio Montale in 1990. His versions of Montale's *Cuttlefish Bones* and *Satura* will be published this year by W.W. Norton. He died February 20, 1992.

Jacqueline Osherow is the author of *Looking for Angels in New York.* Her poems have appeared in *The New Yorker, The New Republic, The Georgia Review* and *Under Thirty-Five: The New Generation of American Poets.* In 1990 she was awarded the Witter Bynner Prize by the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. She is assistant professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of Utah.

Alan Michael Parker's poems have appeared in *Antaeus, Boulevard, Grand Street, The New Republic, The New Yorker* and *The Paris Review.* He teaches at Rutgers University and the Parsons School of Design.

Carl Phillips is a first-year doctoral student in classical philology at Harvard University. His work has appeared in *Agni, Callaloo* and *The Kenyon Review.*

Peter Redgrove is a poet, novelist, playwright and analytical psychologist. His most recent publications include *The First Earthquake* (1989) and *Dressed as for a Tarot Pack* (1990), both poetry collections, *The One Who Set Out to Study Fear* (1989), a novel and *Six Tales from Grimm* (1987), a play. He lives in London.

Tomaž Šalamun is a Slovene poet living in Ljubljana. **Michael Biggins,** his translator, is currently translating a collection of Šalamun's poems and an anthology of contemporary Slovene poetry.

Laurie Sheck is a Guggenheim Fellow in poetry for 1991–92. Her collection of poetry, *Io at Night,* was published in 1990. Her work was included in *Best American Poetry, 1991.*

Daniel Wolff lives in a suburb of New York City.

Baron Wormser's most recent collection of poems, *Atoms, Soul Music and Other Poems,* was published by Paris Review Editions.

Cynthia Zarin's book of poems, *The Swordfish Tooth,* was published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1989.

INTERVIEWS

Alexandra Eyle (Claude Simon interview) is a freelance journalist living in Syracuse, New York. She has recently completed a biography of

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Charles Pack, a timber baron and forest conservationist. She is at work on her first novel and is compiling the memoirs of the surrealist artist Manina.

Lawrence Joseph (Yehuda Amichai interview) has recently published two novels: *Closing Arguments* and *Harry and Catherine.* He is the Edgar Fairchild Professor of Literature at Colgate University.

FEATURE

James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover,* a long poem also based on the Ouija board, will be reissued in May by Alfred A. Knopf. His *Selected Poems* is forthcoming from Knopf this spring. **David Jackson**'s short stories have been included in the O. Henry Prize volumes. The Hand and Scribe have been collaborators at the Ouija board for thirty-five years.

ART

Ford Beckman was born in Columbus, Ohio, in 1952, and lives in Connecticut. His paintings and drawings have been exhibited at the Anders Tornberg Gallery, Stockholm; Hans Meyer Gallery, Dusseldorf; and Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York.

Jan Groover was born in Plainfield, New Jersey, in 1943, and currently lives in France. Her photographs have been exhibited widely, including shows at The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Baltimore Museum of Art, Maryland; The Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio; and Robert Miller Gallery, New York.

Edward Ruscha was born in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1937, and lives in Los Angeles. Major exhibitions of his work have been held at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Robert Miller Gallery, New York; and Leo Castelli Gallery, New York.

We are pleased to announce that Richard Howard will be the next Poetry Editor of The Paris Review, effective issue 124, Fall 1992. Patricia Storace has been Poetry Editor since issue 107, Summer 1988, and is leaving the staff to work on a novel.

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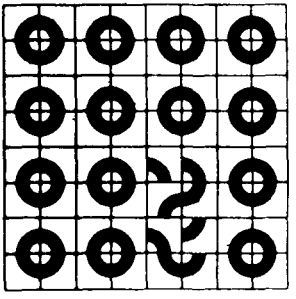

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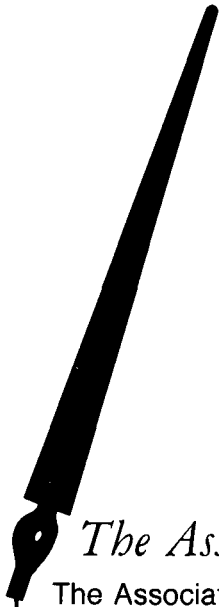

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